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John
Quinn

NOW

THE WAY OF A MAID

BY

KATHARINE TYNAN

(MRS. HINKSON)

LONDON

LAWRENCE AND BULLEN

16, HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN

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Watkins 17 Nov. 1924

THE WAY OF A MAID.

CHAPTER I.

A TOWN AND A HOUSEHOLD.

COOLEVARA is a typical Irish country town. A river flows in the midst of it, and the houses climb each side steeply. On one side are the hills—first a blue wall of rock, behind which lies an exquisite valley; beyond that, range after range, Slieve-Columb overtopping them, with a ragged mantle of clouds about his shoulders, and his face hidden. The other side of the river, which is spanned by one long light bridge, the lanes and streets wind up, corkscrew fashion, to a high plateau, airy as a moorland. You can stand on the edge of it and look down into Coolevara chimney-pots: it would be an admirable point of vantage for the Devil on Two Sticks. The church spires seem to shoot up at your feet, and, looking down at the river, you will see it, most evenings,

like a roadway of heaven—all broken gold and jewels, or a strange, rose-red river out of fairy-land. Coolevara scarcely ever pauses amid its leisurely occupations to look at the sunset. In Ireland you can have magnificent sunsets any night of the year without going out of your way to applaud them.

Coolevara seems, to the visitor from more stirring climes, a dull place and a stagnant, but it has its own interests for those who live in it. The population is nearly altogether Catholic—sturdy, independent folk, they are, for they have, most of them, a black drop in their veins from one of Cromwell's Ironsides. Those inconquerable warriors settled down in various parts of the fertile Irish country, and, in days of peace, had to ground arms before the violet-eyed daughters of the mere Irish. In course of time they or their sons renegaded to the Scarlet Woman, and became as sturdy on her side as they had been on the other in their psalm-singing days. Admirable results these marriages have had. The men are great, brawny, square-shouldered giants, with a close black thatch on their big heads, and an infinite humour about the lines of their close-shaven lips. They affect not the "glibbe," which, in

Spenser's time, was so pestilential a mark of the rebelly Irish, and go clean-shaven. They are darkly ruddy, and in anger turn darker, so that you see the black drop of the Cromwellian in them. They are hard-working, clever, thrifty people, as quick with a kiss as a blow, and so deeply attached to this country of hills and streams, this gentle-bosomed mother, that 'tis little they'll thank you if you refer to that Cromwellian drop, which is rather a sore subject in Coolevara.

The cleavage between Protestants and Catholics in Coolevara, as elsewhere in Ireland, is incredibly great. There is no common ground for these adherents of the different religions to meet. The Protestants are not many: a handful of shopkeepers, Mr. Lacy the lawyer, Mr. Oliver, Lord Westsea's agent and himself a landowner, and the rector and his family. On Sundays the rector's congregation is swelled by the country folk who drive in in their waggonettes and on their outside cars; but the great cold building, with its glimmering funeral tablets set in the walls, is deserted beside the Catholic chapel, with its throngs of devout worshippers reaching out beyond the porch. Catholics in Ireland have not

yet got so far away from penal days as to speak of their "churches." They are "chapels," for all the world as if they were bare Dissenting meeting-houses, and if you call them churches you are suspected of affectation and aping the English manner.

On the whole, the Catholics in Coolevara have the best of it. For all the seeming sluggishness, the townspeople and the surrounding farmers manage to amuse themselves. There are frequent race-meetings, at which the good Coolevara folk turn out, with well-filled hampers in "the well" of their side-cars, whereon to picnic themselves and their friends. The men bet a little, the women gamble at sweepstakes. Every farmer pretty well about Coolevara has had, at one time or another, a little mare or colt in his stable for racing purposes, and the young fellows ride their own horses at the spring and autumn meetings. Then they visit much at each other's houses, and have their games of Nap and Spoil Five for those not inclined for dancing. Weddings and christenings are the occasions of feasting; and as for courting, it is a general amusement and ever in season, though there are not always enough young men to go round.

The Protestants look on at this jigging of their Catholic neighbours with some scandal. They live in the most decorous dulness, so far as the women-folk are concerned. They are intensely Low Church, and keep the Protestant Sabbath in its most rigorous form. The girls play the piano on week-days and do crewel-work; for literature they have the dangerous delights of the *Quiver* and the *Sunday at Home;* sometimes in summer they attend one or two frigid garden-parties. There is no parish work, such as there would be in England, no visiting of their poorer neighbours, for the poor about Coolevara are all Catholics. They fill their little money-boxes for the conversion of the Gold Coast, or some such unlikely mission, and are very blameless, very narrow, and—poor things!—very dreary. As a rule, if they succeed in escaping to a freer atmosphere, after a little preliminary fluttering, they become quite emancipated. They have even been known to return to Coolevara High Church-women.

Scarcely any of these remarks apply to the Olivers, who were the only Protestant gentry residing within the precincts of Coolevara. The Olivers had a big, square, old-fashioned house,

surrounded by gardens, and with an orchard at the back, at the edge of the town. The blue hill-wall rose behind it, and it looked across the smoke of the town to a less substantial, but still handsome, house that stood up barely opposite, its windows peering out to see over the edge of the plateau into the valley below. The latter house belonged to John Hurley, "a strong farmer" and cattle dealer, with whom Mr. Oliver was on excellent terms.

It was chiefly due to Arthur Oliver's personality that his women-folk were little like the wives and daughters of the "squireens" who nearly made up the permanent Protestant gentry of Coolevara. Mr. Oliver was a man most kindly and benevolent, with a fund of shrewd common sense, a delighted, humorous eye for all the world's affairs, and a heart overflowing with brotherhood for his fellow-men. He was a devout man, and his faith influenced every act of his life, while he spoke of it only in his most intimate moments, and it never made him sad-faced. Whether Mr. Scrope, the rector, would have thought his parishioner quite orthodox if he could have looked into his heart may be doubted. Mr. Oliver had been out in the world. He had known, and in a

sense understood, the doubts of other men without sharing them, and he had brought back from the world a wide tolerance and a ready sympathy. Mr. Scrope's chilly and thin spiritual ministrations sufficed him. If he could have chosen he might have preferred a broader creed, but, as it was, his own nature supplied all that was wanting and clothed the dry bones with living flesh.

Mr. Oliver's family consisted of his wife and two daughters. Mrs. Oliver was an English lady, but felt rather more warmly toward the land of her adoption than that of her birth. She was a very sweet, simple, kindly woman, and her husband adored her and laughed at her in most things she did. Her young daughters petted and patronised her, and feared nothing so much as to seriously displease her. She was easily shocked, in a little, conventional sense, by departures from social rules or any straying outside boundaries; but in a serious way, Mrs. Oliver's charity and kindness covered wide spaces. To love and commiserate the sinner, while she loathed the sin, was Mrs. Oliver's way, and she had perpetually under her wing a number of spiritually maimed and hurt creatures: drunkards who had

broken their pledge, women whose folly had estranged their husbands, and the like. The blackest kind of sins were all but unknown in Coolevara. Mrs. Oliver steadied the feet of the penitent on the hard upward road as untiringly as she dispensed hot soup and blankets to the poor people and prescribed for their ailments. As for dumb creatures, she always had a little hospital of them in the big stable-yard at Cromartin. Broken-legged chickens, wry-necked lambs, sick dogs, and many other ailing beasts had known the power of her potions and the dexterity of her surgery. Mr. Oliver used to say that his wife's office in the world was to help lame dogs over stiles, and no doubt he was right.

The charity of Protestants toward their poor Catholic neighbours is often regarded askance in Ireland, where there is so much unhappy experience of proselytism. But Mrs. Oliver's kindness was never feared. In a freer atmosphere she would have followed the current of her own sweetness, and made friends with the priest whose flock she helped and the nuns of whom she heard from her pensioners. But the narrow atmosphere about her bound and constrained her. She was constitutionally timid, and it was only when there

was a call for her help that her kindness overflowed all bounds. Her timidity, which was in a way part of her sweetness, hedged round the lives of her young daughters with precaution. Their little plot of life was narrow, though it was sweet with love and all the virtues, and one of the girls at least often stood tip-toe gazing wistfully over the hedge, which, though it was made of rose-trees, was somewhat imprisoning.

Mrs. Oliver, when these young daughters went momentarily beyond her ken, was as anxious as a hen when her ducklings take to the water. They had cousins in Dublin, to whom they sometimes went for an event—the Horse Show week, or the week of the tennis tournament, or for some unusual gaiety. Mrs. Oliver would have refused these engagements for them if she could, but their father was on their side, and the head of the Dublin household was an eminent ecclesiastical dignitary, so that she did not feel justified in refusing. Further than Dublin they had not been, though their English cousin, Mrs. Vivian, had offered them a London season. But Mrs. Oliver's distress at the suggestion was so evident that neither her daughters nor her husband could bear to press the matter. There was a curious

tender understanding of, and sympathy among them for, her timidity. She never forgot her boy who had been drowned ten years ago in an effort to save a schoolfellow's life. *That* had lined her soft hair with gray, and furrowed her delicate cheeks, and much weeping had made her eyes a little pale and so full of sadness. Those who were spared to her continually troubled her with apprehension. When they were out of sight she suffered exquisitely through her fears for them. So, out of their tender love and pity, they forbore from much absence from her, and were always careful to be punctual in return when they had to leave her, so as to save her from racking her tender heart.

Of the two girls, May, the eldest, was most like her mother; Jessie took after her father very closely. May was as sweet as her name, but a little prim; narrow toward what she could not understand, for her heart had not yet had the dews of sorrow to water it, and the sun of years to ripen it, as her mother's had had. She was gentle, refined, loving, and most dutiful, but, like so many happy young creatures, a little dogmatic. Jessie, the younger, had the fuller and richer nature. She often rather shocked her mother by a slang

phrase or a too decided opinion, but it only needed Mrs. Oliver's first gentle look of reproof to bring the young penitent with loving caresses that chased the cloud from her brow. Both girls were practically far in advance of their mother, and on the rare occasions when Mrs. Oliver accompanied her daughters to any distance from Coolevara, they took care of her as they would of a child, and excited her secret amazement by their practical knowledge of the ways of railways and the procedure in city shops. Mrs. Oliver herself would never have cared to stray from the Coolevara streets and roadways.

Both girls were brown—"brown and graceful." They were quite like each other, but the expression was different. Jessie had a saucy vivacity that flashed at you from her bright eyes and white teeth; her rows of chestnut curls had more of the sun than her sister's ordered locks. They were exceedingly devoted to each other, though year by year their divergences of opinion grew wider. They were closest, perhaps, when Jessie, a brown and gay little child, had given to her sister the unquestioning love and admiration which a younger child often gives to an elder. Now, however, that their opinions differed, it did

not affect their feeling for each other, but, little by little, Jessie had emancipated herself from thinking exactly as her sister did in everything.

The girls had been taught at home by a governess, who did her work very efficiently. They were educated rather than accomplished, and they had all their lives been encouraged to have hobbies. There was a big upstairs room which had been their kingdom in childhood; and what traces of departed hobbies that room kept! It was yet in request on such occasions when their work was of a messy order, and not to be carried on in their own little bowers, gay with chintz and full of pretty things. There were located Jessie's sculptor's tools and wet clay; there, May's photographic fluids and chemicals. The girls were so full of interests that they had little time to be lonely. They read a good deal, but with restrictions. Here Mr. Oliver upheld his wife, and when Jessie pleaded for more liberty, pulled one of her long curls and fondly sent her packing.

The attitude of the Coolevara folk toward the Oliver family was distinctly friendly. It was surprising what an interest the future of the two girls was to the townsfolk. The Coolevara maids and matrons occasionally confessed to their dis-

appointment at the plain manner of dressing of Mr. Oliver's daughters. Why, their tailor-made frocks and cool print blouses in summer couldn't be named in the same day with Nora Halloran's London dresses! Nora Halloran was an heiress, to be sure, and had no mother, and her old father loved to supply money for every whim of hers. She often floated up the aisle of Coolevara chapel on Sundays like a small bird of paradise, and the more gorgeous by contrast with her aunt Miss Carew's sober grays and browns. Coolevara people admired Nora Halloran immensely, and agreed that she could wear things no one else could. They were fain to satisfy themselves with the Olivers' plain attire by the judgment that the garments had "style," and the Coolevara people were not at all out in their judgment.

As for Mr. Oliver, when he was seen coming down the street in his homespuns and leggings, or driving his high-stepping mare to fair or market, the greetings rained round him thick as hailstones. He liked the love of his fellow-men, good gentleman, and his rosy face beamed every side of him in response, while his jokes were followed by a trail of cheerful laughter.

With his own class he was far from being so

popular. As Lord Westsea's agent, he had acted with such discretion and humanity that, when every other estate in the country was under "the Plan," the Westsea tenants were paying. Lord Westsea was a young gentleman wise enough to accept his agent's advice about giving an abatement in time, and now he had occasion to rejoice at his wisdom. Philanthropic Englishmen were sent by the League leaders to see a beneficently managed estate in Lord Westsea's. Fortunately Coolevara was, in great part, the Westsea estate, and so the general trouble passed it by. But the other land agents were bitter over those abatements of rent, and over the scandalous encouragement given to improving tenants on the Westsea estate. A man should stand with his class, they declared, or fall with his class. So Mr. Oliver was in bad odour with them, and save by the rector's family, who were in duty bound, there was a bitter little boycott of him and his. Mr. Oliver treated the matter outwardly as a huge joke, and was sufficiently powerful in Lord Westsea's delighted approval of his action and its results to be able to wait till the time when the acrimony was forgotten. He sometimes affected not to know that it existed, and on a chance meeting

with any of his brother agents, would hail them with the old jolly laugh and the joke, so irresistible to even a bad-tempered Irishman. In his inmost heart it vexed him, for he loved peace; but his philosophic bearing made the boycott far less severe than it would otherwise have been, for, as some good folk argued, what is the use of frowning at a man who looks back at you cheery as a brisk autumn morning? Perhaps only Mrs. Oliver guessed how the bad feeling fretted him inwardly.

CHAPTER II.

KINDLY NEIGHBOURS.

In John Hurley's house over the way John Hurley's wife and two daughters were seated at breakfast. Mrs. Hurley was a mild Madonna-faced woman, and her daughters closely resembled her. Not so her boy, a large photograph of whom stood on the mantel-piece between two Worcester vases filled with autumn leaves. The girlish faces each side of the breakfast table had the common beauty of correct outlines and clear pale colours. Mary's dark silken hair went smoothly off her forehead and was coiled at the back of her shapely head. Eily's ringlets, drooping each side her oval face and large eyes, heightened the spiritual expression her face wore, an expression at once rapt and hidden. The woman at the head of the table looked from one face to the other. You might have seen in her gaze something of a half-grieved perplexity mingling with the fond pride. Mrs. Hurley's little girls were only lent to her, so to speak. They

were fresh from their convent school, and were already counting the days till they could flee away—Mary to the convent that had sheltered her girlhood, Eily to the Sisters of Mercy in a distant town. Mrs. Hurley was proud of their vocations, and yet had a wistful wonder over their other-worldliness. She would have liked a little daughter who would have been content to stay with her and the father, and, devout woman as was, she often felt these young creatures so transcendental as to be small comfort to her in a manner.

She often said to herself that if Jim were at home she would have minded less. But Jim was an army surgeon in India, with some years of his time yet to expire, and the months were turning round to the time when she and John would be alone in this brown old house just as much as they were when he brought her home a bride to it, thirty years ago.

Jim looked strong and reliable in his picture, and his mouth had a tender curve in it like his mother's, that promised well for his kindliness. He looked to be a big, square-shouldered young man, with an intellectual forehead and straight, fearless eyes. Jim had never given them a

moment's pang from the day he was able to walk, and he had given them much cause for pride and pleasure. "The dearest and best boy in the world," said the mother to her cronies: "but sure, when all's said and done, a boy's not all out the same as a little girl. And Jim, please God, 'll be marrying as soon as ever he gets home, and though I'm not grudging him the happiness, his mother won't be the same thing to him."

John Hurley took matters more philosophically. A man's heart is less in the children, and the love of his youth was more to him than son and daughters, dear as they were. Having her he had no fear that the evening of his life would be lonely, and perhaps it cost him less of a pang to yield those stainless little daughters of his to the convent than it would be to give them to a husband, however good he was.

The room was a typical one in a house of the kind. The Hurleys had lived here for more generations than they could count, had farmed their own land and owned many cattle. It was long since the room had been papered and painted. The red flock paper that had been very fine a quarter of a century ago was faded

to a dead-leaf brown, with here and there a fleck of gold in it. There was a heavy carpet on the room and red moreen curtains to the windows. The furniture was covered with black horsehair, yet the room had an undefinable look of comfort and homeliness, which made it far from displeasing. The napery on the table was very fine, though darned in many places, and the tea-cups over which Mrs. Hurley presided were old china, brown and purple. On the wall were portraits of John Hurley's father and mother, the lady stately in a tremendous frilled cap, the gentleman with ruffled shirt front and unpowdered hair, very handsome and dignified-looking.

The Hurleys were simple people, and though always conscious of their descent from a good old stock, yet had few pretensions. A hidden feeling of *noblesse oblige* perhaps helped to keep them unpretentious. Mrs. Hurley's cronies, as a rule, were the wives of old-established shopkeepers in the town: they and Sylvia Carew, little Nora Halloran's maiden aunt, sufficed the good woman for outside society.

It had been considered a very ambitious thing, and somewhat unorthodox too, for the Hurleys to send their son to Trinity College. That was

John Hurley's doing. Like most Irish farmers he was intensely ambitious, and when he discovered that his steady young son had brains as well as good sense, he determined that he should have the best advantages possible. He was far from being a wealthy man, but he didn't grudge the cost of his son's education, and it cost him less than he could have expected, seeing that in the second year of his college life Jim Hurley won a scholarship, which made the rest of his education practically free.

He had a very distinguished course, and ended with a travelling scholarship which enabled him to study the latest foreign theories of medicine and surgery. After this, people were somewhat surprised that he chose to enter the army medical, and go to India with a regiment timed for foreign service. But the young man was in love with his profession, and was willing to serve the most arduous apprenticeship to it. Also he could not well afford to sit down and wait for a practice. But it may be doubted whether all those reasons would have induced him to go to India if he had not fallen in love with Nora Halloran before his last visit home preliminary to embarkation.

He had known her as a small, imperious, much-petted child, but since those days he had seen nothing of her till she bloomed on his senses in all her seductive beauty in those last weeks of his holiday. Old Michael Halloran, her father, had sent her to a French convent, whence she only returned once a year for vacation, and her school-days lasted rather later than they usually do with Coolevara girls. She came home with a French daintiness, and perhaps a French coquetry, added to her natural beauty. Jim, a great *parti* among his young townswomen, but curiously insensible to their charms, succumbed to Nora Halloran at once. He became her accepted lover within a very short space—too short some wise people thought, but it had to be then or not at all, since he was so near departure.

The little heiress was of a very uncommon beauty, with a small, dark, glowing face, lit up with the most splendid eyes. Usually those eyes were languidly veiled under lashes thick and soft as fur, but if their owner were excited and suddenly flashed them wide open you were aware of a glow in their depths which told of possibilities of passion within. She was by way of being delicate, and had had her own will all her life.

Her father, and her mother's sister, Sylvia Carew, who had mothered her in her forlorn babyhood, were as much at her beck and call as Mary, the queer, flat-footed, flat-faced creature, who had been Michael Halloran's servant many years, and was one of the characters of the country-side. She was a little lady who walked in silk attire from the hour that she could walk alone, and the strait uniform of the French convent had been a sore trial to her. However, she made up for it when she came home by her multiplicity of gowns, mostly soft Indian colours and textures. She studied the ladies' fashion papers assiduously, and as she could follow her fancies she developed a style of dressing which enhanced her beauty as well as furnishing a perennial sensation to Coolevara.

She had had her way about her engagement as in everything else. She had a shrewd suspicion that her father yielded much against his will, but then old Michael was never effusive.

She did not guess that the old man had an ancient grievance against Jim Hurley's parents. Long ago when he was a young man of fifty or so,—for eligible bachelors are young at fifty in Coolevara,—having put by a very pretty heap of

money, he looked around him for a woman to share it with him, and queen it over his house and dairy, his best parlour and jaunting-car. He soon made his choice. There was not a prettier girl in the country than Mary O'Riordan, with the snowy skin and deep blue eyes, the black silky ringlets and the carriage of a swan as it sails on the water. He never dreamt that the girl could object. She belonged to honest people with many daughters, and not a penny of dower for them, and he was the richest bachelor in the county. He had been too busy money-grubbing to hear that Mary was already sweethearting with John Hurley, and perhaps if he had heard it he would have brushed the rumours aside contemptuously. Why, the Hurleys were poor as church mice, and look what he had to offer!

He made his advances to Mary's parents, and was received with effusion. The girl was brought in to be introduced to her future husband, but she stood with her long ringlets drooping about her bowed face, and Michael Halloran saw nothing of her expression. He had never had time to consider the question of love-making, and if it ever came natural to him, as it usually does to his

countrymen, it had grown rusty through disuse. Michael Halloran was awkward and ashamed before the girl, and got away as soon as he could, vowing to have the marriage as soon as ever things could be fixed up.

He was as good as his word, but quick as he was someone else was quicker. Within a few days of the marriage Mary and John Hurley made a runaway match of it, and in the hullabaloo that followed it may be doubted that Michael Halloran and Mary's parents had anybody's sympathy but their own.

Michael Halloran retired to his solitudes after that, and it was some years before he made another matrimonial attempt. He was close on sixty then, and looked as if he were rough-hewn out of gray granite. His second venture was more successful. Poor little Mary Carew had not the spirit to save herself from this gray bridegroom, nor perhaps the brave lover to help her through with it. Her match was made for her with as sordid a spirit as if she were a young heifer or a mountain lamb. She went through it quickly, but it killed her. She lived for a year after her marriage, a gray little ghost of her gay and innocent former self. Then Nora

was born, and her mother died, being too languid, it seemed, to have the desire to live even for the sake of the little wailing baby.

Michael Halloran had never forgiven through all these years that old slight put upon him, so it was a bitter pill when he was offered Jim Hurley for a son-in-law. However, he, who was as adamant to the rest of the world, was like wax in his daughter's little hands, and he swallowed the distasteful thing with scarcely a grimace. He was disappointed in more ways than one, for he held John Hurley's son no match for his little girl. He wanted something more tangible than a college education and a reputed cleverness. It was part of the peasant primitiveness which belonged to him that he thought contemptuously of these things.

However, Nora had her way in this as in everything, and so it came to pass that she was to be daughter one day to gentle Mrs. Hurley, who began to yearn over her son's promised wife, very human as she was, the farther away her own young brides of Christ seemed from ordinary human needs and desires.

It was surprising how busy those young persons were, how full the long day from their peni-

tential getting up in the gray of the morning till their early retiring to their pallets. True, their business was less worldly than other-worldly, but it engrossed them all the same, and their expressed ideal was to live as much as possible in the convent manner while they yet remained in their father's house.

So it was that John Hurley found his wife sitting alone behind the big china tea-pot, and gazing before her with a very dreamy look, when he came in from his fair. He kissed her fondly on her fair matronly brow, and it was surprising to see how, under his kiss, the little perplexed creases smoothed themselves out and disappeared. He took his stand on the hearth-rug, and straddled there comfortably, while his wife made a few preparations for his breakfast. When he was established before his bacon and eggs he began to give her the news of the fair.

"I got poor prices for the little bullocks, and yet, when I looked to buy, there was nothing I could fancy. Poor, pining, unlikely beasts that you'd never put a coat on."

"You're home early, John."

"Yes; Oliver gave me a lift to the crossroads. Things seem always to go well with him, he's so

cheery. It keeps a man young to have a heart like his."

"Mr. Oliver is a young man yet, John," said his wife. "Had he any news?"

"Divil a bit. News is as scarce as fine weather. Yes; I'll tell you one thing. He was advising me to rebuild the house; said he'd give me a reduction on the rent if I did it to his satisfaction. He's a powerful man for improvements."

"You wouldn't think of it, John?"

"No, my pet. 'Twill last our time. Let Jim do as he likes when we're gone. Jim 'll be a great man in London by that time, but I don't know Jim if he's the one to part with the old house that has sheltered so many Hurleys. He can make a country-house of it, and perhaps there 'll be a son of his to take our place here some day."

Mrs. Hurley smiled wistfully.

"Where are the *girshas?*" asked her husband, looking round.

"In their own room. I believe they're saying their matins."

"Little *voteens!*" said the father fondly. (*Voteens* is the Irish colloquialism for a devotee.) "Oliver was saying," he went on, "that the old-

fashioned things that we put up with should be altered for the sake of the girls; 'Beautiful creatures they are!' he said in his hearty way. He was amazed when I answered him: ''Deed, then, Mr. Oliver, 'twouldn't be any use thinking of them at all, at all. My eldest is off to her convent at Christmas, her sister at Lady-day, and they're counting the minutes till they can go.'"

"What did he say to that, John?"

"Well, he seemed to think it something to be very sorry about. He said 'twas a big sacrifice for us to rear them for that."

"He's right, John," said Mrs. Hurley sadly. "And, God forgive me! I often feel it hard to make it. Yet anyone could see He made them for Himself, and they couldn't be happy unless they followed His call."

"We'll have to be everything to each other, Mary, as we were before they came. Do you remember the first evening we came home here, and sat by our own hearth, with the curtains pulled against all the world?"

"I'd remember it if I was dead," said Mrs. Hurley, with fervour.

"Oliver was talking about little Nora Halloran. It seems his daughters have scraped acquaintance

with her, and are greatly taken with her. He told me Jim was in luck, and that his youngest girl could talk of nothing but Nora's beauty."

Mrs. Hurley looked fondly toward the portrait on the mantel-shelf.

"There are more than Jim lucky," she said, "though 'tis his own mother says it."

"Oliver has a pleasant way with him," continued her husband. "He said that, by all accounts, our Jim was a boy for any parents to be proud of. I saw old Michael in the fair, too. He gave me a gruff good-morrow. I don't think he's over well pleased with his little girl's match.'

"He's soured, poor man," said Mrs. Hurley gently. "How does he take the Olivers' noticing little Nora, I wonder?"

"Oh, he'll be as proud as Punch. He has the ambition of the very devil. Why, if he could only see our Jim as other people see him, he'd be jumping out of his skin with delight over him. But he lives his lone, and is too obstinate to take the opinions of others if he heard them."

"I don't suppose it 'll do Nora any harm," said Mrs. Hurley a little anxiously.

"Sure, what harm would it be after doing her?" said John Hurley reassuringly. "She has

more sense in that pretty head of hers. And Oliver's daughters are nice, homely little girls, by all accounts, and very simple in themselves."

"None simpler," assented Mrs. Hurley. "No, I'm not afraid that Nora won't find us good enough company afterwards."

CHAPTER III.

A MORNING AT HOME.

A DAY or two later Mrs. Oliver and her daughters were sitting by the morning-room fire. May was writing letters at a small table pulled close to her; her sister was cutting the leaves of a book and gazing meditatively in the clear fire, so welcome this brisk autumn morning. The mother was going through a heap of things to be mended in a basket beside her, and there was a desultory talk going on, in which the letter-writer joined from time to time. They were waiting for Mr. Oliver to come in before going to lunch.

"Mother, dear," said Jessie, in the coaxing way that was habitual to her, "I want that dear little Nora Halloran to come over here to lunch one day. You'd like her, mother, dear. It's a treat to look at her."

"Indeed, Jessie," said her mother, "is that why you want her to come?"

"No, you absurd darling! But I should like her to come here because I am so fond of her."

"Is it a genuine friendship?"

"Oh, yes, darling! You know I don't take capricious fancies."

"Well, then, she must come," said Mrs. Oliver, placidly smiling. "I am prepared to find her very nice indeed, since my girls like her."

"I'm not so enthusiastic as Jessie," May said, a little drily.

"May thinks Nora wears her frocks much too gay for Coolevara, and that she oughtn't to crust her little brown paws with diamonds by daylight. Now, I think anything that adds to the gaiety of life in Coolevara is desirable."

"Nora's Liberty frocks certainly do that," said May. "I don't deny that they become her, but quieter things would be more in place, and would enhance her beauty, I think."

"We must give her a hint," said Jessie good-temperedly. "Shall I ask her on Saturday, dear?"

"Yes; Saturday will do very nicely," assented Mrs. Oliver rather absently. She was holding one of her husband's socks against the light to find out the places that required darning.

The Olivers' morning-room was bright and cheerful, of a rosy terra-cotta that looked warm

no matter how chilly the skies. Three long windows were on one side, overlooking a steep lawn and the valley below. In the middle window a canary's cage hung. The room was warmly carpeted and curtained, and was full of cosey low chairs. Drawn close to the human company were two in which reposed a pampered and wheezy Pomeranian and a very alert Irish terrier, who was named Codger, and was Jessie's precious chattel. It was one of Mrs. Oliver's weaknesses that, admirable housekeeper as she was, she could never steel her heart to keep the dogs out of the chairs. "I do think they enjoy a comfortable chair so much, poor things!" she pleaded, when her husband rallied her upon her weakness.

There was a rap at the door, and a smart maid entered.

"Please, ma'am, Mrs. Lennon and Mary Murphy are waiting in the hall to see you."

"Can I go, darling?" said May, looking up from her writing.

"No, my dear," her mother replied, faintly smiling. "It is generally rather a difficult case when Ellen and Mary come before me at the same time."

"I'll go and see that you get fair play," said

Jessie, jumping up, and throwing a fond young arm about her slender mother.

In the hall two women sat, separated from each other by a few feet of tiles, each on the extreme edge of her chair, and each carrying, wisped about her chin, a fold of the little shawl which covered her head and shoulders. One of the women looked very angry, and had an honest toil-worn face with a simple expression. She looked as if she were used to field work, and was tanned by the sun and wind. Even while she stood up as Mrs. Oliver entered the hall, she kept the steady glare of her honest resentment fixed on her enemy's face.

The second woman was little, peaked, and yellow. She kept her mouth primmed and her eyes turned upward, as though appealing for justice to a higher tribunal. She looked uncommonly self-righteous, and a bad cast in one eye gave her look of appeal a wild intensity it else had lacked. Both women courtesied profoundly to Mrs. Oliver and her daughter.

"Now, what is all this new trouble?" asked the lady of Cromartin. "I thought you two had promised me last week to be good friends."

Both opened their lips to speak, but Mrs. Oliver raised her hand.

"Not both at once, please. Do you speak first, Ellen. I believe you're usually the aggrieved party."

"What is it all about, Mrs. Oliver, ma'am?" the woman began, her voice trembling. "It's just this: I wish, ma'am, you'd once for all bid Mary Murphy attind to her own sowl, an' quit prayin' for me."

"*Quit praying for you, Ellen!*" said Mrs. Oliver in amazement. "But, surely, if Mary prays for you it is the greatest kindness she can do for you."

"Kindness, *moryah!*" said Ellen, with extreme bitterness. "'Tis a kindness that's not after lavin' me an ounce av charackter. That's the sort o' kindness. There's a mission goin' on in the town, as maybe you've heard tell, ma'am, an' Mary Murphy that's prayin' this many a year for my sowl to the dethrimint av her own, 't is afther asking the people's prayers she is for the convarsion av me by manes av the mission. Flops on her knees to Miss Mary Hurley in the street yesterday, an' says she: 'I've wearied Heaven this nine or ten years, Miss Mary, in supplication for the sowl av a great sinner, a poor owld reprobate, an' if you'll induce her, Miss Mary,' she says, 'to

kneel to the missioner, my prayers 'll follow you night an' morning.' *A great sinner! an' an owld reprobate!* Them was nice descriptions av an honest woman, Mrs. Oliver, ma'am."

She stopped for breath, and Mary Murphy took up the tale with an air of conscious virtue and a voice mincing and acidulated.

"It's this way, Mrs. Oliver: Mrs. Lennon is careless of her duty an' foolish about spendin' her few wages av a Saturday night on porther in the public house. An' 'tis for her own sake I am prayin' for her, an' long as I've prayed without fruit, I haven't given up hope, an' will do my duty as long as the health's in my body."

"Listen to her!" broke in Mrs. Lennon. "Porther av a Saturday night! Well, then, there's them that gets porther without drinkin' it honest in the sight av the neighbours. An' there's them wants prayin' for more thin me that always earned my bread honest. An' there's them that puts on piety to humbug the poor innocent nuns an' cadge things out av them." Then, with a sudden fierceness that made Mrs. Oliver jump, she whisked about to her enemy: "An' who gev *you* charge av *my* sowl, Mary Murphy?" she asked, with exceeding bitterness.

Mary Murphy kept her sanctified upward gaze.

"There's them," she said, "that makes allegations I scorn to answer. But as long as I live I'll pray for sinners, an' die happy, feelin' my time was well spent."

"Well, Mary," said Mrs. Oliver a little sharply, "if you must pray for Ellen, I wish you'd do it quietly, and not talk so much about it. Remember that that's not the only way in which charity can be exercised. Now, go! And as for you, Ellen, you're really too foolish to be quarrelling over such a thing. Go down to the kitchen. I know cook has some chickens she wants you to pluck. Good-morning, Mary!"

During this arbitration Mr. Oliver had passed through the hall, had lingered long enough to catch a word or two of the dispute, and with a comical look of comprehension at Jessie had passed on. He kept his feelings to himself till the morning-room door closed upon him; then he broke into a series of delighted chuckles. May looked up from her letter-writing.

"Is it a new joke, dear, or the old joke that makes the world so incessantly delightful to you?"

"The latest trouble among your mother's pensioners. Ellen Lennon accuses Mary Murphy of

destroying her character by the simple process of praying publicly for her as a sinner. I don't know how your mother will settle it, to be sure. I was very much inclined to quote to them the Scriptural injunction about praying for your enemies, but they were so engrossed in the matter that they scarcely noticed me, and I had no excuse for lingering to hear it out."

Just then Mrs. Oliver and Jessie came in. Mr. Oliver went to meet his wife with a tender gallantry, and put her into the most comfortable chair.

"Poor Edith!" he said. "What troubles you bring on yourself by all your goodness to people. Why don't you send your troublesome cases to me? I'm a magistrate, and could adjudicate according to law."

"Mother has cases, dear, where your legal knowledge wouldn't be worth a *thraneen*," said Jessie. "She keeps half Coolevara from 'summonsing' the other half. As Mary used to say, it's as good as a play to see them come, 'flitterin' an' screechin' like a lot of turkey hens,' with their complaints to mother."

"Edith, my dear," said her husband, with mock gravity, "you'll ruin your husband and

family with the indiscretion of your ways. What's this I hear about your setting up half Father Phelan's school children with white muslin frocks for their confirmation next week?"

Mrs. Oliver blushed guiltily. "They were very badly off for frocks, Arthur. I didn't think it would be becoming to have the poor little children go in rags to what is a sacred ceremony to them."

"All very fine, my dear, but wait till Scrope hears of it. There are enough evil allegations against your husband without your identifying yourself with Popery."

Mrs. Oliver looked at him with vague alarm, which made him lean down repentantly and kiss her cheek.

"Only one of my jokes, love. When will you get used to them and learn to sift my chaff from my wheat?"

"But how did you know, Arthur?"

"Old Kenrick told me. He thinks all your benefactions ought to go to good Protestants, like himself. He brought your enormity in during a long grumble, the gist of which was that he wanted a bit of a henhouse to accommo-

date his fowl. I paid him off by pretending not to understand that. I just said as I tipped up the horse, 'But surely you wouldn't be wearing white muslin dresses at your time of life, Mr. Kenrick?' I could scarcely contain myself till I was out of the old chap's hearing, and then I roared, as I remembered his face, till I alarmed the birds on the bushes."

"You seem to have all the funny adventures," said Jessie. "I believe they lie in wait for you."

"Oh, they're there for anybody to see. It all depends on the point of view. I was congratulating old Graves on his splendid crop of barley this morning, when he said to me, watching me out of his sly old eyes, 'Ah, but Mr. Oliver, sir, think of the money 'twill cost to get it in!' There's pessimism for you!"

He stooped and lifted the Pomeranian out of his very comfortable chair and seated himself.

"Any letters for me this morning?" he asked.

"Yes, there's a little bundle in your study. Wait, and I'll fetch them," said Jessie.

She came back in a minute and laid them on his knee. "There, dear," she said, "I hope there's not more than a moderate allowance of bills among them."

"No threatening letters, anyhow, Jess," laughed her father. "There's not another agent in the country hasn't Captain Moonlight among his correspondents."

He read through them for a few moments in silence. Then he said:

"Can you take in St. Edmund, my dear? He offers to come for some shooting and the pleasure of our society, if we can have him."

There was a simultaneous exclamation of delight from the two girls.

"*Of course*," said Mrs. Oliver warmly. "I am always glad to have St. Edmund, poor boy! Shall I write to him?"

"By post time, if you will, my dear. He would like to cross over on Thursday, and be with us Friday afternoon."

"That will be jolly," said Jessie. "We shall have quite a little luncheon party on Saturday with that dear St. Edmund and my Nora Halloran."

"Is the little Halloran girl coming to see us, Jess," asked her father.

"Yes. Mother says I may ask her for Saturday. I think St. Edmund will say that he hasn't seen many London beauties to rival Nora."

"Take care of St. Edmund's heart, my dear. You'd better warn him that your beauty is already bespoken."

"He would scarcely be attracted by a little country girl like Jessie's friend," said May a little coldly.

"I'm not so sure," said Jessie. "He might, after having run the gauntlet of so many London seasons, just succumb to a little country beauty."

"Poor St. Edmund!" sighed Mrs. Oliver gently. "Better leave him to take care of his own heart, children."

"Now, why does mother always speak of St. Edmund with such commiseration?" said Jessie gaily.

"Mother's way," answered Mr. Oliver. "Why, she pities even you and me, Jessie! It's a form her affection takes. But, now, what are you going to do to amuse your cousin when he comes? The resources open to him among the families of the resident gentry about Coolevara on former visits are now closed, owing to the fact that your father is popularly supposed to be the author of the Plan, if not in league with Captain Moonlight himself."

"Great stupids!" said Jessie contemptuously.

"Oh, St. Edmund won't miss *them!* He used only go to their dull houses to oblige us. It was a horrible strain on him, poor dear! Do you remember the tennis party at the Marshes', where he and Mr. Scrope and little Teddy Turner were the only masculine beings? St. Edmund was expected to play a set with every woman on the ground. He wouldn't have got done by now. But he didn't keep up long. He just turned his back on all those expectant rows and rows of ladies, and came off to the kitchen-garden with me and ate cherries. He said I was worse than he was, because I said to Miss Eliza Marsh: 'What a delightful old-fashioned garden you have, Miss Marsh! What an ideal garden for courting!'"

"*Jessie!*" said Mrs. Oliver, with emphasis.

"Yes, darling," said the unabashed culprit. "But what made the speech so *mal apropos* was the painful absence of the male element, and all those rows of spinsters who heard me with 'a stony British stare.'"

"Upon my word, Jess," said her father, "I'm not sure that your letting your tongue run away with you is not as responsible for my boycotting as your mother's papistical sympathies."

"There now, mother dear, we're fellow-sinners."

"And here's Jess, now," said Mr. Oliver, with comical despair, "not content with estranging the blue blood of this county, she takes to her heart one of the rebelly Irish, a Papist as well, and one whom the Misses Marsh or Mrs. Leigh Moore and her daughters would be far from considering their social equal. I wonder you're not concerned about it, Edith."

"I'm satisfied that my girl's friend must be a lady," replied Mrs. Oliver calmly, "else my girl would not wish to make a friend of her."

"She couldn't help being a lady, could she, mother, dear, with that sweet, gentle aunt of hers, who brought her up?" said Jessie.

"Miss Carew looks a lady, certainly," assented her mother. "And I hear nothing of her that is not good and gentle."

"There is the luncheon bell," broke in Mr. Oliver. "Come, my dears, you must even finish the conversation at the table. I can only say that there's little use in *my* trying to keep my daughters in check when their mother gives them their own way in everything."

"Mother's way is to spoil the whole of us, father included," quoth his youngest daughter.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN ARRIVES.

NORA was quite conscious that in Coolevara it would be considered social promotion for her to go visiting at Cromartin, yet she had a delicate and dainty conceit of herself which kept her from acknowledging that it was true, even to herself. All the same, she considered her wardrobe with more than usual care on Saturday morning, developing a fastidiousness which in her heart amazed her. She ended by selecting her quietest out-door attire. Perhaps her occasional long, musing gaze over the October woodlands, where the hazel nuts were hanging heavy in the boughs, decided her. "My love in her attire doth show her wit," and Nora's final choice was a frock of nut-brown cloth trimmed with fur, and a little hat of the same fur which sat softly on her shining curls. In the hat there was a touch of scarlet which she repeated in the gown by pinning a bunch of autumn leaves in the belt. She drew off her rings, with half a sigh, all except

one, and dropped them on her dressing-table. Then she pulled on her brown *suéde* gloves, and, leaning forward, regarded herself steadily in the glass. Yes, she said to herself, she had chosen wisely.

The little face that looked back at her was glowing as a rose. Her golden-brown hair and eyes showed more sweetly for the demureness of her attire. Under the fur, round her smooth childish neck, she had a string of those Venetian beads, brown with gold lights in them, which repeated happily the colour of her hair and eyes. They became her as they would become a child. Her red lips were parted over little teeth white as the kernel of a nut. She smiled at herself out of innocent satisfaction with her beauty.

She went downstairs leisurely and into the parlour, where her aunt was sitting at her household accounts. Miss Carew looked up, half absently. "Are you going, darling?" she said. She was a very sweet-looking maiden lady, with still an indefinable air of youth about her. Her hair had threads of silver through its silky fairness, and her delicate skin was faded as yesterday's rose, and full of fine little lines. But she kept her youthful figure; and the smile, appealing

and tender, was not to be associated with age. Truth to tell, it would have been a severe shock to Sylvia Carew if she had heard herself referred to as an old woman, though in the solitude of her chamber she was wont to tell herself that she was old, with a persistence that showed how hard it was for her to learn the lesson.

She had had what the poor people called "an ancient ould romance," and the fragrance hung about her with a faint ghostly scent as of dead rose leaves. Her contemporaries had married, grown buxom, reared their families, and had realised or not realised their youthful dreams, according as fate had dealt kindly or unkindly by them. In her heart Sylvia Carew thought her unfinished romance sweeter than the tangible husbands and children. Her thought was the thought in Keats' ode:

> "She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
> Forever wilt thou love and she be fair."

There in her past the golden city of her hopes hung, arrested in the enchanted air, a mirage faint and tender, but more real than such things often are when one has seized and possessed them.

She looked at her niece with that faint smile, pathetic as winter sunshine.

"Well, Aunt Sylvia," said that little person a trifle impatiently, "how do you like me?"

"Like you, darling?" echoed a soft and low voice. "I always like you. No one could look prettier and sweeter."

"Ah, but you'd say the same, no matter what I wore. You don't exercise a proper motherly supervision over my wardrobe, and you don't see that I dressed myself very quietly to-day because I know Mrs. Oliver likes girls to go in sober grays and browns. Ah, here comes Mary. She'll be more observant."

Mary came shambling into the room, a big, heavily-built girl, with her broad face grinning under her housemaid's cap. She had been Mrs. Oliver's second housemaid before coming as general servant to the House by the Mill, and so she was specially interested in this outing of her young mistress.

"Well, Miss Nora," she said, beaming, "you look lovely, though I never saw you dressed so plain. But that's how quality does, isn't it, miss?"

"Yes, Mary," said Nora, "and I'm very glad

to have the hall-mark of your approval. That's exactly what I aimed at, to do as quality does."

Mary was deeply attached to her young mistress, and was unfailingly good-tempered and sympathetic to every word of the delicate and rather spoilt little heiress. From the young mother who died so sadly Nora had inherited nerves and a vitality easily depressed. During the period when she suffered under these things, Mary's queer philosophy and the grim humour with which she regarded her fellow-creatures often cheered the girl when all other comfort had failed. Nora used to say, indeed, that she would not be without Mary in the house for anything. One could well believe, looking at the infinite humour of her wide mouth and little twinkling eyes, that she was a character, and Mary's speech was indeed better worth listening to than that of many accomplished and learned persons.

Nora was to have yet another testimony to the becomingness of her attire and the brightness of her beauty. As she went down the steps she met her father coming up. He went back a step or two and waited for her on the sweep of gravel in front of the house, smiling a difficult smile at her as she came down to him, pretty and stately.

Michael Halloran was not given to smiling, and, therefore, the awkward light which broke over his face at sight of his darling was touching, if anyone had been there to notice it. He was a beetle-browed, shaggy, fierce-looking old man, with a very bitter twist to the end of his tongue, said Coolevara people. He looked tremendously strong, despite his age, with his great head sunk between huge shoulders. He still supervised all his concerns actively, and though people often advised him to get out of the land, Michael Halloran would shake his head: "Thank ye, kindly, but I hope God 'll let me die in harness." And, indeed, it was easier to believe that he would drop down in his place some day, with his great bulk stricken as an oak is stricken by lightning, than to imagine him resting quietly in the chimney-corner in the evening of his years. He had the name of being a very hard man, but his tenderness to his little daughter, since she could remember, had been unvarying, and she in return fairly worshipped him, and held him in the right about everything.

She laughed half-coquettishly down at him, where he stood with that adoring smile. "Am I pretty, dad?" she asked.

"Pretty, my jewel!" he replied; "as pretty as the prettiest squirrel in Dromin woods."

"Shall I please the Olivers, do you think?"

"'Tis they would be hard to please, if you didn't."

She ran down the steps lightly and kissed him on his dusty cheek. Then she went away, twirling her little cane down the hilly road through the pines, while the old man looked after her with pride and delight.

At the end of the bit of straight avenue she waved her hand back to him. He still stood at the door-step of the house behind him, which looked comfortable and ancient, but dwarfed by all the disused mill-buildings beyond, from which it had its name. The mill-buildings were derelict and half in ruins. In the lower floor of one range Michael Halloran had stalled his cattle. The upper floors of the least ruinous were his corn lofts and granaries. But beyond these were ranges of the gaunt buildings, upon the crumbling floors of which none dare set foot. They were given over to rats and bats, that made strange noises there of nights. The mill yards were shiny with vegetation and dampness, and one had to be careful there not to stumble upon the

rotting wood that once covered some deep well. Over all stood up the monstrous chimney, gaunt and useless.

The mill buildings had always been a kind of nightmare to Nora. How often had she looked out at them from her little room at night, seeing them stark against the sky, and shuddered. So, when she was at school in her French convent, had she trembled to see, from the dormitory window by her bed, the tablet of white marble in the cemetery on which the names of the dead nuns were engraved, gleaming in the moonlight. It would have been a big and expensive job to pull down the buildings and clear off the *débris*, or so practical a man as Michael Halloran would long ago have cleared the ground of them. So there they stood till Time himself should level them, and the storms of winters to come should bring them down like a house of cards.

Nora swung blithely on the way to Cromartin, and arrived the prettier for the exercise and excitement, which set her cheeks in a glow. Jessie met her in the hall, and took charge of her, carrying her off upstairs to her own room to remove her hat, for she was to spend a good long part of the day at the Olivers'. When they

reached that pretty sanctum, with its rosy chintz hangings and green furniture, Jessie stood and inspected her friend, finishing up with an emphatic little nod of approval. "You darling," she said, "you look just exactly as I wanted you to!"

Nora brushed out her little mop head at the glass, while Jessie fussed about much excited at this first visit of her friend.

"I'll tell you, Noreen, why I wanted to have you looking even sweeter than usual, if that were possible. It's not altogether for mother, though I want mother to be taken with you, but we have a dear, delightful cousin here, who is devoted to beauty, and is most fastidious, I am sure, though he never said so, and I did want to show him what we could do in Coolevara."

Nora smiled a roguish little smile.

"Who is this very fine gentleman?"

"Oh, you needn't laugh! He's no mere dandy, though what I said might seem to suggest it. He's a dear, dear fellow, and he hasn't had much happiness in his life, which makes us fonder of him. When he was quite a boy he fell in love with a married lady, a Mrs. Illingworth——"

She paused, for Nora looked a little horrified.

"Don't be scandalised, you goose! His was a boy's romantic devotion, and she seems to have accepted it, poor thing, rather selfishly, I think, because she was dying and had a brute of a husband. Everyone knows that it was an ideal thing. Only poor St. Edmund has never seemed to care for any woman since she died, and I don't know whether he's going to remain a bachelor or not: but what a pity that would be, for he has a beautiful house and place all going to waste, and I am sure he would make an ideal husband. He is so thoughtful and kind to women always."

Nora looked very thoughtful over this recital. It was just the kind of story to touch her susceptible heart. She went downstairs with Jessie very eager to see the hero of this romance.

She was led up first to Mrs. Oliver in her low chair. That dear woman, with one of her motherly impulses, drew down Nora's face and kissed it warmly. Nora felt, with a sudden rush of ardour, that she could die for Mrs. Oliver if need be.

She looked shyly through her long lashes at Mr. Oliver and the gentleman who was introduced as Mr. Hilliard. He looked exactly like

his story, she thought, and her quiet glances at his face, during the luncheon hour following, confirmed her in this impression.

Hilliard was a tall, loosely built man, somewhere in the thirties. He had a colourless, refined face, with a look of breeding about it. A close observer would have seen possibilities of passion in his wide nostrils, but his normal expression was rather a languid one. He had been an athlete in his college days, but had given that up with many other tastes and pursuits. He moved with his day, and knew all that was transpiring, but it was with a lax interest he contemplated human affairs in general. The ambitions of his boyhood had flickered out with the life of the woman he had so unhappily loved.

At Cromartin his spirit seemed always to be braced and strengthened. With those cousins he gradually lost his bored manner and his lack of interest. The atmosphere was so fresh and wholesome, as purifying as the mountain air. He was deeply attached to his cousin Arthur. Their very dissimilarities made him love him better. Mr. Oliver's wonderful religious faith in a day of calamity, the day when his own son was borne to his grave, had deeply moved the

younger man, who had forgotten how to pray since Helen Illingworth died.

He loved Mrs. Oliver, too, and her tender kindness to him. She lectured and petted him as his own mother might have done. At Cromartin, more than any other place, he had seemed to find the atmosphere of home. He had said to himself that he would be a homeless man for ever. The one woman, who ought to have been his wife and the mother of his children, was dead, and had never been his. He had not forgotten to bleed inwardly at the sound of her name, or his pulses to stab him at the turn of a head, or the expression of a face, that reminded him suddenly of her. She had been a good woman, and had left him an unstained memory of her to keep, yet there were times when that seemed cold comfort, and the natural man in him cried out bitterly for the warmth of possession that had never been his. The women of his set said he was too selfish to marry. He was wealthy enough to choose freely if he cared, but he never seemed to care. No one, not even his sister, guessed at the death in life that had come upon a heart once hot and generous, and a spirit once proud and strong.

St. Edmund's attachment to Mr. Oliver was

one of the most wholesome things about him. He enjoyed rallying him on his friendliness with the tenants and his corresponding unpopularity with the other agents.

"You should come to England, Arthur," he was saying now. "Your abilities are thrown away in this unfortunate country. I hear your men are paying, when 'No Rent!' is the motto on every other estate in the country."

"Aye," said Mr. Oliver cheerfully, "and meet with the same fate as Staunton met with from old Scropeshire. You know Staunton is the very haughtiest of Irish land agents. Well, someone recommended him to Scropeshire when the Killowen estate tumbled in to him; and he got the agency. He went over after a time to suggest various things, perhaps putting on the screw among them, for Staunton 's always in hot water. Lord Scropeshire had no idea at all of the standing of Irish land agents—thought they were just like his own farm bailiff. He interviewed Staunton rather shortly in his library, and then closed the conference with: "Well, Mr. Staunton, you'll find your lunch in the servants' hall, and a pleasant journey to you." Staunton thought the man had gone stark, staring mad,

and was so dumbfoundered that he allowed the big footman to bow him out without a word. However, he recovered himself so far as to wave the fellow away when he would have led him to downstairs regions. He could scarcely contain himself with rage till he got to the next market town, where he wrote a brief note to Scropeshire, resigning the agency. His lordship doesn't know to this day what possessed the man, but has put it down as another example of Irish irresponsibility. The estates are managed now by a firm of lawyers in Ardmore; but if you want to take a rise out of Staunton, you've only to whisper the name of Scropeshire."

St. Edmund laughed at the story, and then asked: "Is Mr. Staunton one of your pro-English ones?"

"Now, that is your English mistake," answered Mr. Oliver. "Staunton is to some extent anti-Irish, but that doesn't involve being pro-English."

"It's only a few half-bred ones up in Dublin who are pro-English," said Jessie.

Mrs. Oliver dropped her knife and fork, and looked horrified at Jessie, who blushed and laughed apologetically. "Dear mother!" she

said, "I'm so sorry. But you've no idea how my tongue runs away with me."

"Jessie states a fact in rather strong language," said her father. "You find really good people who are anti-Irish to the extent of being anti-national. The pro-English are quite another sort, and do not flourish down here. I'm not sure that some of our Protestant gentry are not more opposed to what is called West-Britonism than any Fenian of them all. Their idea is equality with England, not subservience to her, and, by Jove! some of your clever English fellows would be amazed at the haughty mental attitude toward you of the Irish class whom you regard as the best friends of your domination. So they are, but it's from distrust of their Roman Catholic fellow-countrymen. If they could get over that you'd have something to do to hold your own in this island."

"But *you* don't distrust the Catholics, dear Arthur," said his wife, "and yet you're not disaffected."

"Aint I, by Jove?" said Mr. Oliver. "You'd better ask Staunton and Lee and Wilson. I'm not sure but they'd put me down as a ranker recreant than Parnell himself. He, now, is an

example of an Irish Protestant who has broken free from the fear of the Catholics."

"Mr. Parnell has an American mother," said May.

"And you, father," said Jessie, "are sprung of a good Evangelical stock, and are only broader-minded than your forbears because you have some extraordinary strain of benevolence in you that has been fostered by mother, and makes the whole world men and brothers to you."

"But what does Miss Halloran say?" said Mr. Oliver, turning to his silent right-hand neighbour. "She, no doubt, could give us some new views on the subject."

Nora blushed, but lifted up her big eyes to her host. "I have often heard my father and Mr. Hurley say that there are faults on both sides, usually, but that it would be hard for tenants to be discontented, if they were always so justly treated as those are who are under Mr. Oliver."

"By Jove," said Hilliard to himself, "the little woman has *aplomb!*"

Mrs. Oliver looked gratefully at Nora, and Mr. Oliver laughed, well-pleased.

"Never mind, father, dear," said Jessie, "if the other land agents think you lack *esprit de corps* because you happen to be a man of peace. Lord Westsea is well satisfied with you, for he's the only landlord in this county that's getting a penny of rent. They say even Parnell's tenants are not paying."

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Mr. Oliver, "and though I go a long way with the tenants, I don't go all his way. I think he's making the mistake of building up his fabric of patriotism on a foundation of self-interest. I fear one of these days he'll find to his grief that he's been creating a nation of pocket-patriots."

"Well, anyhow, Arthur," said St. Edmund, "I'd rather have the agents against me than the tenants. The former don't go in for potting their man, do they?"

"Oh, well, the tenants don't always do it in malice. Did I ever tell you about George Blake Browne?"

"Not that I remember; but anyhow, your stories bear repetition."

"Well," said Mr. Oliver, with one of his most comical looks, "George Blake Browne is one of the decentest fellows and poorest landlords

in all Ireland. He has a lot of wild mountain land, not worth a thraneen of rent, and the tenants are the wildest lot of scarecrows from here to Bloody Foreland. Well, George lived along as best he could, through the hard times, and forbore to press for the rent. He didn't need much, poor man, only enough to keep him in whiskey and tobacco. He could never afford to get married. But bye-and-bye, it came that George hadn't a copper at all, and he called the tenants together. 'Oh, begorra, boys,' said he, 'I'm stone-broke, and you'll have to pay or go. If you can't scrape together at least half a year's rent out of the twelve or fourteen you owe me, I'll have to send you notices to quit. I'll be heartbroken to do it, but I must.' The boys went out rather downcast. They got together and discussed the matter, and got heated over it, and at last someone suggested that a shot would quiet him. They hadn't a bit of malice against him, not a bit, but shooting was going on all around them, and they didn't like his talk of paying the rent. There was some question of drawing lots for whoever was to fire the shot, but they funked it, rather, and so it was decided at last they should all do the job

in a body; and Black Nick Brophy, the stoutest man of the lot, was to fire the shot. I believe that same required a stout heart, for the old blunderbuss they had unearthed was an inch thick in rust, and was as likely to blow the lot of them to pieces, as anything else. They waited for George one dark December night, when they knew he was spending the evening in Iniscarra. It was easy to stalk poor George indeed, for he spent six nights out of seven playing spoil five with the lawyer, the doctor, and a couple of other good fellows in Iniscarra, and the seventh night they spent with him. But it happened this night there was some poteen introduced at the party that had never seen the Queen's head, and George felt more comfortable where he was, than driving the road home, and so he took a bed on the hearth-rug. The boys waited till they were numb, let alone that Black Nick barred all conversation, and had even made them teetotalers till the deed was done. So the night wore away, and the conspirators grew sad. At last one said fearfully: 'My mind misgives me, boys, but somthin's happened the poor master.' Nick dropped the musket, and

cried, "'Wirra, God forgive ye, ye omadhawn! what 'ud happen the cr'atur?' 'I'm misdoubtin' the Sally mare he drives,' said one, who happened to be George's henchman, and was in the thing just for the fun of it; 'she's a scary thing, an' as often as not the master's too full to be drivin' the likes of her.' 'Well, boys,' said Black Nick, 'God forbid anything 'ud happen the poor master, but before we go home, it 'ud be as well we'd travel back as far as Iniscarra Bridge to see if any harm has befallen him, an' if he's needin' help.' And travel they did. And there were no more attempts made on George Burke Blake."

"You're an extraordinary people," said Hilliard, when the laughter had subsided. "You make a joke of things we English people would count very serious. Don't you think so, Mrs. Oliver?" he said, addressing that lady, who had looked vaguely puzzled over her husband's story.

"Oh, Edith doesn't understand us always, any more than yourself. She's an Englishwoman to the backbone. We Celts often laugh at things we take very much to heart, and half the time we laugh because we won't cry. Our laughter doesn't always mean what it seems to you."

"Someone said, papa," remarked Jessie, "that a thing must be really serious to you when you can afford to laugh at it. It isn't quite the same thing as you mean, but I think the Irish Roman Catholics are quite a proof of the truth of that saying. They jest about the things of their religion in a way that would seem quite profane to us, and they never would think of doing it if they weren't conscious of their own faith and real reverence behind."

"I see you still cling to Bridget and Mary Jane, Mrs. Oliver," said Hilliard. "I wonder Mr. Scrope doesn't regard it as a scandal that your servants should be all Catholics."

"Oh, Scrope has a Catholic cook, for the matter of that," said Mr. Oliver; "and if he wanted to grumble at my wife, he'd have plenty of cause besides that. What do you think of her finding confirmation frocks and first communion frocks for half the children in Coolevara? Then she has embroiled me past praying for with Wilson. He has some wretched tenants out on the bog whom he'd like to see safe inside the walls of Coolevara Prison. They're living under a few wet scraws—God help them!—and my wife here is keeping them alive with soup and blankets and

every eatable scrap she can lay hands on. Sure, it's no wonder I'm a marked man!"

Mrs. Oliver gazed at her husband in some distress. He stood up and went to her, as a very young husband might, and kissed her soft matronly cheek. "There, there, my dear," he said, "it was only a jest. Edith never knows when I'm serious and when I'm not, Hilliard."

"Papa, dear," said Jessie, "did you hear about Mary Holahan? She prayed the other day that the heavens might be our bed. 'How do you make that agree, Mary,' said I, 'with our being Protestants?' 'Never mind, Miss Jessie, acushla,' she said; 'ye'll all slip in on the score of your invincible ignorance.'"

Nora blushed somewhat for this co-religionist of hers, but was relieved to find that they all took it as an excellent jest.

"By the way, Miss Halloran," said Mr. Oliver, turning to her, "I want to show this Englishman an Irish model farm. Do you think we would find your father at home if we called on Tuesday or Wednesday, and that he would be willing to take us over his land?"

"I am sure he would be delighted," said Nora. "Shall I say Tuesday?"

"Yes, please; and if the day doesn't suit him, we can select another. I think your scientific farmers in Norfolk and Lincolnshire are great humbugs, Hilliard. I've seen slipshod farming and great pieces of waste on those model farms, so-called, that would horrify Mr. Halloran."

When Nora went home and told her father that Mr. Oliver was bringing his cousin on the Tuesday, he was well pleased. She was enthusiastic about the kindness of the Olivers and the delightful visit she had made. Her father listened to her accounts of it with almost childish interest. She chattered a great deal about it to the Hurleys, too, when she walked home with them after mass. About the English cousin she said little. She felt herself rather afraid of his cleverness and his possible amusement at her rusticity, but she had not misread the admiration in his eyes, and she was flattered and pleased by it. She said nothing at all about the impending visit on Tuesday to the Hurleys.

CHAPTER V.

TUESDAY AFTERNOON.

IT was Tuesday afternoon, and Mr. Oliver and the Englishman were driving behind a spanking mare round the sweep of hill beyond which lay the House by the Mill. The day was coldly bright, with a misty sun glittering in a sky like a polished silver mirror. The tenderness of the sunset and the gloaming were yet an hour away, and it was three o'clock, the dreary middle age of the day. Mr. Oliver had been driving about the country all day, but had only picked up Hilliard at lunch-time. His cheeks, with the sparkle of the frost in them, and his clear eye, and hearty laugh, the very way he handled the reins with his hands encased in stout knitted gloves, all had a suggestion of country and open-air life much in contrast with the town pallor of the man beside him. Yet Hilliard looked wholesome enough, and was by no manner of means a sybarite. He still loved football and all outdoor

games with an enthusiasm seldom revealed. He was talking to his host in an interested way.

"I want to know," he said, "about the man the little girl's engaged to. I hope for the sake of so dainty a bit of femininity that's he's not a clod-hopper."

"Reassure yourself, St. Edmund," said Mr. Oliver drily. "The man's a university man—my own university, T. C. D., by the way. When I saw him last he was thoroughly presentable. A square-jawed, determined-looking fellow, with the stuff in him to take the world by the throat. He had a most distinguished career at college, and is likely to go far in his profession, I hear. He had a paper in the *Lancet* a few weeks ago on a new disease which has broken out in some Indian hill-tribe. Why, the man's so devoted to his profession that he has sacrificed the leave of absence he might have had this year. He is likely to go up a step by remaining on the spot, and he's making a special study of this mysterious malady. Not every man would sacrifice seeing his sweetheart and having a six months' rest after India, because of some plague-stricken blacks or other."

"How does she like it?" asked Hilliard.

"Well, it's this way," replied Mr. Oliver. "The father—her father—won't hear of them marrying while he's in India. He has three good years to run of his time out there. He's slaving and saving like mad, Jessie tells me. I suppose the run home would eat into his pile, and, after all, he couldn't take her away with him. Then there's his pet study hopelessly broken into. Sensible fellow to stay, I think."

"I wonder if her father likes the marriage?"

"From deductions, I should say not," said Mr. Oliver. "The Hurleys are really poor people, though they live comfortably and want for nothing. John Hurley has some land under me, and he is quite candid with me about his affairs. He said to me one day that he had enough left to portion the little girls, and the boy could take care of himself."

"Sensible fellow!" said Hilliard, echoing his cousin.

"Michael Halloran would be better pleased," Mr. Oliver went on, "if John Hurley could put down the red gold for his boy. Michael doesn't believe in the money being all on one side, and that his side, of the bargain. You'll find him an extraordinarily shrewd old fellow, yet he has

a primitive nature with it. He wants something more tangible than brains and a university training and good manners. He will be a little disbelieving over these things, and cynically disposed toward his future son-in-law, till he sees the gold guineas rolling in to him for fees. When Jim is surgeon-general his father-in-law will begin to believe in him, may even get him to leave the service, and buy him a practice in Harley Street. Old Halloran's more ambitious than his fellows, and every Irish farmer is ambitious. But he won't put down his money till he sees what he's getting for it."

"You are a remarkable people," said St. Edmund. "But here comes your man, if I mistake not."

"I thought I'd look for you here, Mr. Oliver," said Michael Halloran, advancing from the field-gate on which he had been leaning. "I want you to take the silos on your way, and 'twould be only turning back. I'm proud to see you, sir," he said, in response to Mr. Oliver's introduction of the other man. He climbed on the back of the dog-cart, and the talk became entirely agricultural. Hilliard at first was conscious of feeling a little bored,—he was wondering if

their visit was to be entirely an out-door one,—but after a time he became interested in spite of himself. They visited the silos, the heady fermentation from which made Hilliard reel; they drove across grass land, where a row of patient figures were picking stones, to see the fat bullocks, and afterward to visit some drainage-works in progress in the low-lying fields. St. Edmund was delighted with the austerity of the landscape, fast turning wintry, though the trees along the hill-side were yet wearing cressets. He pointed to the women, stooped, going along in the cold light. "A fine subject for Millet," he said. Mr. Oliver translated to the farmer: "My cousin thinks your stone-pickers would make a fine picture, Mr. Halloran." Michael grunted unresponsively. "I wish he had to stand over them for an hour. There's more mischief in half a dozen women than in a tree full of monkeys."

When there was a gate to be opened, Hilliard changed places with the farmer. "Listen to us, St. Edmund," said Mr. Oliver, "and you'll derive more knowledge from a practical man, like my friend here, than from any number of your *doctrinaire* papers. Mr. Hilliard is a considerable land owner in England," he explained, "and bears the

reputation of a good landlord. But I doubt if he has as many good farmers as you and our friend Carmody."

Michael Halloran looked as pleased as he knew how—in fact, he was embarrassed with pleasure. It was his self-consciousness made him take the compliment rather for his neighbour than himself. "Aye," he said, "Tom Carmody's a fine farmer. 'Tis not much waste land you'd see between us. *Our* crops are not *prashoge* and thistles."

"No, indeed," said Mr. Oliver. "I wish the other farmers could say as much. You've always the kind neighbours to provide you with the thistle-down and the poppy seed. Carmody had a splendid wheat crop this year."

"Aye," said Halloran drily. "I overed the quality of my own to him one day. There aren't many better crops than came off the stone field. Carmody says behind my back that I'm a boaster. But when I overed the wheat to him he turned red as a turkey-cock, and says he, 'Mick Halloran, man, look across the wall of your stone field into my slang, and if you don't go and eat your head for a boaster after that, you're not the man I take you to be."

"Carmody's a good farmer and he knows it," said Mr. Oliver, laughing, "but he also values you. He says you're a spur to him. He really paid you a very handsome compliment the other day. 'I'm as good a farmer,' he said, 'as there is in the continent of Europe, but if Michael Halloran was ten years a younger man he'd pass me.' Now, aren't you touched?"

"'Twas handsome of Tom, I'll allow," said old Halloran, with a faint ironic smile.

Presently, over the drainage question, the two elder men came to business. Halloran wanted an allowance off the rent toward the work greater than the agent was prepared to grant him. The discussion went on with an energy that amused Hilliard, loosely holding the reins from his seat behind, while the other two stamped and clapped hands, and conducted the debate with great heartiness. By the time it was settled, the valley was full of blue mist, through which distant lights showed warmly.

"You'll be after turning in for a cup of tea, Mr. Oliver," said the farmer, "before I show you my plan about the cow houses. They'll be lit up by then, and the boys at the milking."

Hilliard was glad to get down and stamp about

on his cold feet, and clap his chilly hands together. He had enjoyed the drive over the farm and the shrewd practical talk, but now he welcomed a change.

Nora's parlour was cosy in the firelight and the glow from the rose-shaded lamp. The room's incongruities were hidden in the brown gloom beyond the circle of the firelight. Miss Carew sat in her easy chair knitting. Nora, very sweet, in a soft pink gown, which made her eyes as brown as a trout stream, was on the hearth-rug as usual, and nursing a small, anxious-eyed Irish terrier puppy, own brother to Codger, which had been Jessie's birthday gift to her. She jumped up when the gentlemen came in, and stood in the circle of the lamplight, with her soft lips smiling and her round arms hugging the puppy in a childish way.

All three men were struck in a different way with her beauty, and her old father devoured her with his eyes. Hilliard said, under his breath, thinking of Jim Hurley in India, "Lucky beggar!" and the next moment was leaning over Miss Carew's hand with an almost exaggerated courtesy. He was quite struck with the delicate air of refinement. "Ah!" he said to himself,

"that is where the little one gets her lady-hood."

Nora dispensed the tea charmingly, and presently the elder men went out of doors, Hilliard remaining where he was. He examined the puppy and heard his pedigree, and admired the silver tuft of hair on his forehead, and the vigorous, stoutly-knit little form. Nora was highly pleased, especially as Rags took kindly to his new acquaintance, and ensconced himself very comfortably on the wretched substitute for a lap that a man's knees must seem to a dog. Nora declared that Rags wasn't comfortable, but was flattered; which, perhaps, was true.

The quartette became very good friends. No one could have accused Hilliard of languor as he sat leaning forward in the firelight, stroking the dog, and bringing out the stores of his experience to please these two simple women. He came from the great world of which only echoes had drifted to Coolevara. He knew all the great men and women, had visited Meredith at his house in Surrey, and had been the guest of Tennyson; he had sat by George Eliot in her corner at some of the Priory Sunday evenings, and had been treated with a singular kindness.

He knew Rossetti, and was enthusiastic over his work. His listeners were quite ignorant about the pre-Raffaelites, but listened with an intelligent greediness. He promised to bring them a Tauchnitz Rossetti, which was his constant companion, and mentally resolved that when he returned to London he would make aunt and niece a gift of a little library of modern poets. For Coolevara had not got much later in poetry than Byron and Mrs. Hemans, excepting only the Oliver household.

Hilliard was very careful to disparage no idol of these simple people. His amusement at their hero-worship, which he could have so easily damped, he kept to himself. He felt rather envious of the frame of mind which could regard literary London as a kingdom of giants, a garden wherein one might behold "men like trees walking." He was conscious of doing his best to please his hearers, and his amiability gave him a comfortable glow. He would not have laid himself out so to win the approval of a duchess, and here he was striving all he knew how to please the daughter and sister-in-law of an Irish farmer. Afterward he concluded, on thinking it over, that he must be growing younger. He certainly had not once remembered to feel bored.

Mr. Oliver was highly pleased with him when he came in and found the party so friendly, and St. Edmund in full flow about some exciting adventure. He spoke of it to his wife afterward. "There's a lot of good in that lad," he said. "I wish he had some interest in life. I never saw him so animated as he was talking to Miss Carew and Halloran's little girl. I could see they were fetched with him, and old Michael was as proud as Punch."

"Poor St. Edmund!" said Mrs. Oliver. "Do you remember what a bright little lad he was when we were married? And afterwards when he stayed with us, and was up to all manner of boyish mischief. How changed he was when we saw him again, after a few short years. He had grown to look so old, and his face full of lines, and he had acquired that lazy, indifferent manner which now has grown natural to him."

"An entanglement with a married woman is an accursed thing for a boy," said her husband.

Mrs. Oliver forgot to rebuke him.

"The poor boy!" she said sadly; "I wonder if he has ever forgotten her. I'm afraid not, for sometimes that mask of indifference slips away from his face. I found him the other evening

asleep in your smoke-room; it was after your hard morning's duck shooting. He looked much younger than he does when awake. But it was a tragical face, too, poor boy, and it made my heart ache, for I thought of our own boy snatched from all the world's sorrow."

"Poor mother," said her husband softly; "I wonder if you ever forget your boy."

"Never, dear, sleeping or waking," she said. "Though I give thanks to God always for you and the other dear children. But sure God saw His own Son die, and we ought to find His will sweet when He appoints us to suffer like Himself."

"Yes, dear," said the husband, "and I'd rather have him safe with God than his life broken and his faith withered, as it is with poor St. Edmund. However," he said, turning with cheerful readiness from this common sorrow, "I'm not without hope for St. Edmund. He's more interested in things this time than I've seen him for long. You wouldn't know the boy this evening; he laid himself out so good-naturedly to entertain those two unsophisticated creatures."

"How long is it since Mrs. Illingworth died?" asked Mrs. Oliver.

"Ten years," replied her husband.

"It's a long time for a man to remember," said Mrs. Oliver.

"Illingworth didn't remember very long," her husband commented. "If I remember rightly he consoled himself a year or two after her death. She was a lovely creature, certainly, when I saw her, though she was something of an invalid. Just the woman for a lad to make a goddess of."

"Carry told me," said Mrs. Oliver, "that when she died St. Edmund took it in a curious way. He seemed ever so much happier, and yet more when her husband re-married. He seemed to think she belonged to him, after all. I have often wondered how it began; it seems so strange to me for a married woman to have anything to do with any lover except her husband?"

"Well, my dear," said the man, "in this case it was easy enough. It was a case of a beautiful, delicate woman ill-mated with a man not over-scrupulous about his pleasures. Then there was a hot, generous young fellow full of knight-errantry, and so much younger than she, that it was quite natural for her to be maternally tender toward him. Oh, it was all easy enough, but I will say that few affairs of the kind have been

less soiled with earth. If there had been guilt in the thing it would have damned the boy. As it is it has only saddened him, and kept him from forming the ties that would be natural to him. Yet, perhaps, in a sense, too, his passion for a woman kept him straight amid the many temptations of London."

"It may be so," said Mrs. Oliver, sighing as she always sighed when she thought of perils from which her own boy was safe. "But I should be so glad if I thought poor St. Edmund looked for peace in the only place where it is certain to be found. I wish he were a believer, poor boy."

"Let him alone," said her husband. "I dare say he believes more than he pretends."

Mr. Oliver was always optimistic about the goodness of other people.

"By the way, Edith," he said, "I was telling Father Phelan to-day about your pensioner, Biddy Quinn. I came upon her courtesying to his reverence with the greatest humility. When she had gone off blessing the two of us I told him how she had represented herself to you as being boycotted by the Catholics because she came of a Protestant stock. The good man laughed till the tears ran down his jolly face. 'Why, she

always tells me in confidence,' he said, 'that the Protestants will do nothing for her because she turned.' She had the grace to exempt you, Edith, my dear, for Father Phelan said to her: 'Why, I hear you've the run of the kitchen at Cromartin, and that's what makes you so fat.' She was taken aback for a minute, but then she said, 'Thrue for yer reverence, but there's few Protestants like Mrs. Oliver. D'ye think, yer reverence, she'll be saved?' Phelan enjoyed it, I can tell you. He can't resist a joke."

"Still, I'm sorry," said Mrs. Oliver plaintively, "that Biddy should be so untruthful. But," with a shade of anxiety, "wasn't it dangerous to tell her priest about her?"

"Not a bit," said Mr. Oliver. "Father Phelan's a good sort and would laugh even at a joke against himself. He says poor old Biddy, despite her subterfuges, is an honest soul. She's very good to old Katty who lives with her, and now the old thing is down with rheumatism she begs for both. Biddy's always cheerful and smiling, and Katty's temper is no joke. And after all, my dear, Biddy's only fulfilling the apostolic injunction to be all things to all men."

Mrs. Oliver smiled faintly. She thought her

husband infallible, yet she was not quite easy in her mind at his joke. "Poor old Katty," she said musingly: "I miss her from the roads. Just this time of year one always saw her picking up her bundle of twigs by the hedges. The road was never so lonely as one walked in the shortening evenings but one met Katty."

Jessie came to the door with a sharp rap. "I'm just going down, dears," she called in, "and the gong will sound immediately."

This was the quiet hour of counsel husband and wife always had before dinner, when they talked over the events of the day. Mr. Oliver kissed his wife's brow and smoothed out a wrinkle or two with his fingers, as he stood up. He had not yet forgotten to be a lover.

CHAPTER VI.

LOVE AND DUTY.

MICHAEL HALLORAN was always in bed by eight o'clock. He was up at 4.30, winter and summer, and in the yard before the earliest milker in his employment. He made his own cup of tea over a spirit lamp when he got up, and then came to breakfast with Nora and her aunt at nine. Mary always declared the master gave no trouble. He was one of those men whose rule is easy where women are concerned. He thought it was all right that women should lie soft and sleep late. If he had had a boy he would have believed in the hardening process for him, so it was perhaps as well that his one child was a daughter. Even when he was hectoring towards a woman there was a gentleness in his manner which made it tolerable. Men, on the contrary, often found him overbearing.

He had his solid tea when he came in at six this evening as usual. Nora read for half an hour to him out of the local paper, and by that

time he was beginning to nod. So after kissing his daughter fondly he took his candle and went upstairs.

Nora and her aunt were accustomed to those long evenings in each other's society. In winter they never looked for a visitor, though in the long summer evenings Father Phelan or one of his curates sometimes came in to tea and remained till ten, or, occasionally, it was one of the few ladies who, like Miss Carew, belonged to the St. Vincent de Paul Society; but once the dark evenings came they looked for no visitors. They were quite happy together usually, Miss Carew reading or lace-making, Nora engrossed in a novel or book of poems, or doing some frivolous little bit of work. But to-night she was more restless than usual, and inclined for conversation; seeing which her aunt put by her story-book and took up her lace-making instead. The talk naturally turned on the afternoon visitor.

"What do you think of him, dear?" asked Nora, with a little anxious air. Miss Carew understood, of course, that the Olivers were Nora's friends, and that she was rather proud of it.

"I like him," she replied. "He has a refined face, and he is kind, or he would not have tried

so hard to please us. But he looks, at times, rather tired for so young a man. I noticed it when he came in, and thought he was an older man than he seemed afterwards when he brightened up."

"He is really only two years older than Jim," said Nora thoughtfully. "But Jim was always so eager. He used to say that life was too short for all the plans he had in his head. Now, Mr. Hilliard looks very much more tired of life than papa, who is an old man."

"A trouble often makes people look like that," said Miss Carew. "And there are lines of trouble in that young man's face."

"Oh, he has had a very sad story, indeed, Aunt Sylvia," said Nora. "Jessie told me about it, but of course it is a great secret. When he was quite a boy he had a great friend, a Mrs. Illingworth. Jessie says she was as beautiful as an angel, though rather delicate, and a great many people adored her. She was very sweet to Mr. Hilliard, who was a lonely boy, with his father and mother dead and his sisters married. And her husband behaved badly to her—was a very coarse and wicked man, Jessie says. And the end of it was, Mr. Hilliard fell hopelessly in

love with her. She sent him away when she found out, but wasn't angry with him. I am sure there was nothing to be angry about. And she died soon afterward. Jessie says he has never loved anyone else, or seemed attracted by any woman, though that was ten years ago. The Olivers think he won't marry, though Jessie says he ought to, for there is his beautiful Overdale in the hands of servants all these years, except when he takes a shooting party down. Mr. Oliver thinks he would make such a good landlord if he could only throw off his indolence and take an interest. But Jessie says he has been just the same since Mrs. Illingworth died, with that manner nearly always, as if he couldn't be very much surprised or delighted about anything."

"It is a sad story," said Miss Carew, after a pause; "but it might be sadder. After all, he has kept his ideal unspotted, and I often think there can be no real unhappiness except where there is sin."

Nora took up one of her aunt's transparent hands and stroked it.

"I can't imagine sin where love is," she said softly—for a girl's thoughts of love are always so dreamy and have so little of earth in them.

"Perhaps he would marry one of your friends," said her aunt, with the air of making a happy suggestion.

"Perhaps," assented Nora.

She was gazing into the fire with her chin propped on her hands. She had a vague sense of not liking the suggestion. She considered it a little with that vague repulsion, still pushing the thought away from her. Yet, why should he not? Either of the girls would make a man happy—May, with her strong sense of duty, her timid, somewhat narrow, sweetness, her high notions about honour and dignity; or Jessie, dear Jessie, with her large heart, her clever brains, her strong will ever turned to the right. She forced herself to appraise the sisters warmly, though some sudden drop of coldness had come into her heart.

"You believe in women marrying, auntie, dear?" queried Nora.

"Oh, yes," said Miss Carew, with a soft frown. "A happy marriage is a woman's heaven. That is why I am so glad my dear little girl is to be in warm and tender keeping."

"Darling," said Nora, "I want you to tell me, if it won't hurt you, why you never married.

Don't tell me, if it hurts you, but forgive me. I have often wondered about this," and she touched reverently a quaint, Eastern-looking ring which her aunt always wore.

The elder woman covered her eyes with her hand, and did not reply. Nora waited in a troubled tenderness, and after a minute or two Miss Carew spoke.

"It doesn't hurt me to answer you, darling," she said, "but mine is a sad little story. Its memory is very dear to me, but it will sadden you, I fear, with your happy love. It is like bringing out dead rose-leaves from a jar when the room is full of fresh June roses."

"I don't know, dear," answered Nora. "Don't the young love sadness? I know I always love my sad stories most."

"That is because you are happy, dear," said her aunt; "and may God keep all sadness from you, my pet! Well, I will tell you my story, since you wish for it."

Nora settled herself on the rug to listen, and laid her cheek against one of her aunt's hands. She drew Rags comfortably on to her skirt. Outside, the equinoctial wind began to wail eerily, but inside all looked quiet and tender.

"I was the eldest of a large family, as you know, dear," Miss Carew began. "They are all scattered now. Susan and Katie with your dear mother in heaven; Richard and Patrick and Alice and Eily far away in America, and living their own lives. Well, I suppose I was pretty, as a young girl, but my dear mother died when I was only a slip of sixteen, and there were all those children; and my father—God rest him!—was a hard man, though just and conscientious. I had to mother them all, and I had to stand between them and his severity, without any of the right and authority my mother would have had. So I had very little time to think whether I was pretty or not.

"Looking back at it now, I think it would have been better for us all if my father had married again; but he beguiled himself into thinking that it was his sense of duty to us kept him single, and it was one of the things he used to hold up to the boys when he began to have words with them, and that was as soon as they had the down on their lips. I had no power over him, and he thought he was always in the right. I could only comfort the poor children when he was harsh with them, and he was often harsh. I

knew him to knock down the boys for questioning his will, and though he never struck a woman, he has bruised me with his grasp when he was pushing me out of the room, I having come trembling to him on an office of mediation."

Miss Carew paused and sighed deeply. If Nora had only known, she was thinking of the far-away match-making of her young sister with Michael Halloran which had ended so sadly. After a minute or two she went on:

"My father never thought of my marrying. I was too useful to him, and I was better content to remain single. We hadn't much free choice in those days about our lovers. People would have been ready enough to make my match, but I had a horror of having things settled for me in that way. I used to run away and lock myself up when any busybody came mooting such a thing to my father. He was generally quick enough to dismiss them, and, indeed, I don't know how he'd have managed without me. So the years went by, and the young ones grew up, and dearly as they loved me they pushed me into the background. The young ones had whatever gaieties were going. If their friends came to the house it was I who saw that their entertainment was right,

and everything made comfortable for them; but when there were pic-nics or excursions, or anything of the sort, it came to be understood that I should stay at home to have things pleasant when the merry-makers returned. I acquiesced in the position, and was really quite happy at home. But I had no time to make friends. I remember that one or two people offered me friendship. I was invited to visit people whose friendship would have been pleasant to me, but at the mere whisper of my going away there was always such clamour and consternation that I yielded and refused my invitation. The young ones all loved me, and looked to me for everything. They made a barrier round me with their noisy young affection, and pushed away those who might have comforted me when they themselves had gone their own way and made their own lives."

"How selfish!" interrupted Nora, with a kindling face of indignation.

"Selfish!" echoed her aunt. "Perhaps it was, but I made them selfish. Self-sacrifice is good in its way, my Nora, but we must take care that we don't sacrifice ourselves to the detriment of others. Well, the years passed, and one day I

awoke to the fact that my prettiness was over. I had never thought very much about my looks, yet it gave me a pang to look in the glass and see that my golden curls had faded, my eyes had faded, and my skin had taken a dried look quite unlike the down and bloom of my young sisters. I was one of those fair women who are really more faded at thirty than they are twenty years later. I had not ceased to be pretty, but a dulness had come over my prettiness. You see, dear, I have an impersonal feeling to that girl in the glass of nearly a score years ago, and can discuss her impartially."

"Poor girl!" murmured Nora, with a soft kiss on her aunt's slim fingers.

"Well," Miss Carew continued, "not so long after that the poor girl was a rich and radiant girl. There came to our house one day, with some visitors, a captain in the merchant service, who was staying with his mother at Ardmore, where she had come for the sea-bathing. I thought at first sight that he had the most honest face I ever saw. The sun and the sea wind had tanned him, but his forehead under the peak of his cap was white as a child's; his features were irregular, but his eyes looked at one with a clear,

direct gaze, and his smile was very friendly. He became quite good friends with us, and returned again and again to our house. The boys adored him, and he flirted with the girls in a jolly impartial way, so that not a girl of the neighbourhood could say he singled her out. Anyone might hear his pretty speeches, which, indeed, he never uttered under his breath; the girls were agreed that so far as they were concerned he was a sort of detrimental, for the prettiest girl in the neighbourhood could not flatter herself that she had made any serious impression on him. It was a long time before I really allowed myself to believe that he used to turn from them and look at me with something quite different in his expression. But presently I had to believe it, for everyone else began to believe it. One day I was not present, but he was surrounded by the prettiest girls in the county; your dear mother was there and your aunts Alice and Eily. They had all agreed to treat him as he treated them, bandying compliments and jests with a great deal of innocent laughter. Presently Eily asked him who was the prettiest girl he knew. They thought he'd answer it aptly with a compliment that should include all. To their amazement he an-

swered, seriously: 'Your sister Sylvia: she is the most beautiful woman in all the world.'"

Miss Carew suddenly covered her face with her hands and gave a little dry sob. She recovered herself in a minute or two and went on: "I was really that to him, the most beautiful woman in the world. Others might see the dulness of my hair and my faded eyes and skin, but whatever scales were on his eyes he saw me transfigured. He used to tell me that I was so delicate in his sight that he was afraid to breathe on me lest I should vanish. That was the strangest thing of all to me, I, who had been so long at everyone's beck and call; I who was never allowed to be tired, that I should be so infinitely cared for, so precious, so delicate in the eyes of this man. He began to take care of me at once, even before I had promised to be his wife. It came to be an understood thing that he was my property, and that when he came we were to be left alone. He wasn't gay with me, at all; in his quiet moments he was even sad. I didn't care for the amused eyes of the onlookers. I just sank into his love and tenderness as into the most exquisite rest.

"People used to tell me I had grown as young as the youngest, and that I grew prettier every

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day. Perhaps I acquired some of the wild-rose beauty he saw in me, and which I might have had in my early girlhood. Why not? With a spirit so wonderfully transformed, why should not the body be transformed too, and the radiance within send some glory shining through. I believe there was never so happy a woman in all the world as I, Sylvia Carew, in those days. I was in no hurry for him to speak; I was so sure he would speak in time, and I wanted to take my happiness by degrees. And then one day, when we were sitting together, he asked me to become his wife. I have not told you that he was a Protestant, and in those days it was far more unheard of for Catholics and Protestants to marry than it is now. But somehow I was not anxious about that, though I should perhaps have seen grave cause for anxiety if it were another girl and not myself. I never thought that his love could be anything but a gift of God, and once we were engaged I used to thank God with trembling, for it seemed to me that as his wife his soul would be in my charge as well as his dear body. When I said he was a Protestant I meant that he had been brought up as a Protestant, but his beliefs were very undogmatic. He had a simple faith in God,

the faith of one whose life is passed looking on the works of God, and he had a strong moral sense of right and wrong. He was a good man, if ever one lived."

"I am sure he was good or you would never have loved him," murmured the girl at her knee.

The elder woman went on dreamily: "He was a most passionate lover. Oh, indeed, I have had my day, for no women was ever better loved. No one made us unhappy. Old Canon Segrave had a talk with him and then came and told me that he was a good man, and that God would bless our union. My father, after Richard had spoken to him, called me to his room, as he was going to bed, and said, with a softness I had never known in him before: 'So my girl is going to be happy. Well, none ever better deserved her happiness.'

"He was very sharp with the young ones when they cried out that my marriage must be postponed a long time. It was arranged for April, less than two months off, and I had little time enough to get ready. The days passed like a golden dream. It seems to me, looking back, that I didn't walk on the earth in

those days at all. His ship was to be ready the week of our marriage. He had fitted up a cabin for his bride, and the voyage was to be our honeymoon. It was to be to strange beautiful places in the South Seas, which he used to describe for me with great delight. It was a week from my wedding-day when the terrible trouble came."

She was silent, looking into the past, with a strange rigid look. Nora crept up closer to her, and whispered, "What happened then, darling?"

Miss Carew came back to the present with a start. She went on:

"It was all my own fault, my own fault. He had always wanted to tell me, but I would not listen. Even before he asked me to be his wife, he told me he had a sad secret in his life that he would tell me about some day. 'Yes, some day,' I said, being so happy that I wanted to push off from me all that savoured of unhappiness. Again he tried to tell me the day he asked me to marry him, and I would not listen. I thought there was plenty of time for telling sad secrets in the whole life we were to spend together. I only wanted happy secrets then, I, who had been so long starved of love, that I

sucked it up, when it came, as a starved plant in a pot sucks in the long delayed water. I think I felt, too, that the telling would be painful to him. He always approached it with a saddening of his happy face. And so I kept pushing it off, pushing it off.

"It was a week to our marriage day when he compelled me to listen. He looked so grave that I felt a sudden chill. 'Tell me first,' I said, 'it is nothing that could separate us.' 'Oh, no,' he said, with a startled look, 'nothing that could separate us. Why, what could separate us now?' But for his will I should have evaded it even then. Thank God, we were saved, though we lost our wonderful land of promise, a land that seemed fairer than any Eden to our happy eyes.

"I remember how he began to tell me, holding my hands. He had no idea of the terrible revelation he was going to make. He was only very fearful, very ashamed to tell me, whom he thought so pure, about the wicked woman who was his wife. For, my dear, he was a divorced man, and his wife was living. He had not the remotest thought that I could not marry him. He was only troubled and distressed at having to

tell his new, true wife of the woman who had deceived his young faith, and dragged his honour in the mire, and nearly broken his honest heart. I don't know how I got away from him. I dragged myself from him, and ran out of the room with a blind instinct to hide myself from all human eyes. I stumbled on my father just outside the door. I gasped to him: 'Richard—go to him. Ask him to tell you—explain to him!' and then, eluding him, I rushed upstairs, and locked myself in my room.

"After that I was ill. I remember a shivering and a blind stupor, and feeling paralysed with cold and then parched with heat. After that nothingness, and then I woke up to brighter days and to find myself very weak, and lying with a cropped head in my familiar room. The day that was to have been my wedding day was over and gone. It was May, and I always dread May and its unending twilights for that May's sake.

"I crept back to life somehow, but very slowly. Everyone was very tender to me, but I was nearly well when, one day, my father came and sat by me, and told me everything, more tenderly than any woman could have done. Poor father, I like to think of his goodness to

me then. Richard was gone away on the lonely voyage that was to have been his honeymoon. No one blamed him; it had all happened in such utter ignorance. I heard afterward how he had raged furiously at first, and swore that nothing should take me from him. But afterward I was thought to be dying, and his passion was extinguished under his agony and remorse. They said he used to walk up and down in the night and rain watching my windows. The delicate things, wine and fruit and jellies, that I had had in my convalescence, came from him. No one had the heart to refuse them, and he used to send to London, to Covent Garden and such places, for the greatest rarities for me. And as soon as he knew my life was saved he went away. He gave my father a letter to be given to me as soon as I was able for it. There were only a few words: 'Forgive me. I never knew. Will you keep my few gifts, and still wear my ring? I shall always think of you as my beloved wife, and if I am ever free to claim you, I will come.'

"There, my darling, that is all my story, and that is the secret of my ring. What, *crying!*" as she lifted up Nora's face, which had been buried

in her lap. "Dear, tender-hearted child, don't cry, it is all so long ago. Nearly the length of your whole life."

"Did you never hear of him?" whispered Nora out of her tears.

"Once or twice I read that his ship had touched at foreign ports. But never directly. He may be dead. He would never come back to me unless he were free, and now, if he is living, we are both quite old people. I scarcely look now to see his face in this world."

"I'm sure," said Nora, "that if he came, he would think you just as lovely as ever."

"I'm not sure that he wouldn't," replied her aunt, with a happy lighting-up of her face. Old as she was she had not forgotten to be sure of her lover.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST STEP.

THE fine autumn weather was succeeded by a dripping, black November. Every little stream in the valley was roaring and turbulent, and the road was carpeted with the black sodden leaves that a month ago had hung out gold and scarlet banners along the mountain sides. The hills hid their heads in the mist, and the wisps of cloud drifted down in the valley and tangled about your feet. Sometimes you walked with your head and shoulders in clear air and your feet hidden; or, again, the valley was so full of solid mist that a stranger coming upon it, round the winding hill road from Coolevara, might take it to be a lake, and the swelling purple hill flanks its rocky, precipitious shore. It was neuralgic weather, and even the robin on the dripping boughs had barely a stave.

Nora Halloran was enduring a period of vague misery. Alternations of health and spirits were common enough with her, and might to some

extent be accounted for by the circumstances of her birth. Those who saw Nora only in her sweet and gay moments could scarcely imagine what she was in the days when all her world seemed stale and flat, a pricked bubble from which the iridescence has departed, leaving nothingness. She lost even interest in her frocks, and would spend half the day in her room wrapped up shiveringly in her dressing-gown. Only for her father she would have remained in bed with her face turned to the wall, but, indulgent as he was, he would have no lying in bed except in case of illness. So Nora moaned all day with her small face puffed out as you see a robin's feathers in the cold, her eyes sombre and dull, and the very rings of her hair uncurled from their little sweet clusters.

Miss Carew always grieved over those days of depression, but was too used to their occurrence to be uneasy. She waited quietly till they went by, knowing that some morning or evening Nora would come to her, clothed and in her right mind, and silently ask forgiveness with a kiss. This time the return to happiness was rather longer about coming than usual. The blue fit had succeeded a period of dreamy exaltation in which

the girl would come in from the purple and scarlet autumn evening, and sit in the half-light on the rug, hugging her knees, and smiling into the heart of the fire. Miss Carew watched this phase with a very tender sympathy, believing she understood some of the thoughts it betokened.

Mr. Hilliard had come again once or twice, with a book of poetry or a magazine for his credentials, and had sat with them, talking in his musical, well-bred voice, and telling them wonderful anecdotes till there was only time for him to get back for dinner at Cromartin. Then there had been a period of anxious suspense, when Rags had had the distemper, and Mr. Hilliard had been so kind with sympathy and advice. Rags was convalescent now and basking in a little hamper by Miss Carew's knee. Nora at present took no interest in the dear little beast, and the care of him was transferred to her aunt. It was ten days since Hilliard's last visit. Hunting had begun, and such festivities as the country people knew were in full swing. This was probably the reason why for ten whole days Jessie, the faithful Jessie, seemed to have forgotten her friend.

Mary came in to replenish Miss Carew's fire,

which had been sulking all day in sympathy with the weather and the little mistress of the house. Miss Carew was at her desk writing, and Mary took advantage of her absorption to pour in a little paraffin oil which made a merry blaze. The lady wrote on, unheeding. Mary expected a rebuke. Paraffin oil was her great panacea for bad fires—also for smoky chimneys. When she had once succeeded in setting a chimney on fire, and, as she called it, "chatin' the sweeps," she was happy enough to put up with the reproof that followed. It was fortunate Michael Halloran's rick-yard was at a safe distance from his house chimneys.

Mary sat backward on her heels, and contemplated the leaping fire with much satisfaction. She coughed tentatively once or twice, but Miss Carew was too absorbed to heed her. At last she spoke. "Miss Nora's up in that perishin' cowld room, ma'am. I axed her to let me light a bit of a fire, but she said 'No!' in a perished, miserable kind of way. D'ye think I could coax her out of her blue-mowldiness, ma'am?"

"I wish you'd try, Mary," said Miss Carew, looking round.

Now, Mary's eccentric way of looking at things

often made Nora laugh in full flood-tide of her misery, and with the laugh the blue devils were exorcised; so her suggestion was not without reason.

She gathered up her awkward bulk from the rug and went upstairs. She knocked at the door, and, receiving no answer, went in. Her young mistress was in tears, dull tears, which had evidently been coming for some time, and were not the result of any sudden spring freshet. She was lying on her bed, and did not look round as Mary shambled in.

"Get up, Miss Nora, jewel," she said, "an' I'll brush your hair. And after that, if I was you, I'd be getting out for a walk. You've been in the house three days, sorra less, an' that 'ud be enough to blue-mowld anyone. Maybe you'd be after goin' to see the Miss Olivers now?"

Nora turned round at the suggestion. "But they haven't asked me, Mary," she said, "and it seems quite an age since I've seen them."

"Och," said Mary, "sure you wouldn't have them sendin' out billy duxes to ax ye to drop in for a cup o' tay. I knows their ways. They'll be sittin' in the drawing-room about four o'clock, hopin' somebody 'll drop in. I can hear Miss

Jessie sayin', 'Isn't it a wonder Miss Nora Halloran wouldn't be that friendly to drop over.'"

Nora got up languidly from her bed, but there were the beginnings of a little hopeful smile about her lips. "I think I'll take your advice, Mary," she said, "and go out. It's more depressing indoors than out to-day."

She sat at the glass while Mary brushed her rough curls to silkiness. She certainly felt much more cheerful now she was up. She wondered why she had not thought of the expedition to Cromartin herself. Certainly Jessie and Mr. Hilliard had called quite unceremoniously on her about the hour of afternoon tea, but she was still a little shy of Mr. and Mrs. Oliver. However, now Mary had suggested the expedition, the touch of nervousness only made it more adventurous. Mary, looking at the brightening face in the glass, congratulated herself on her success.

"Miss Nora," she said, "did ye hear tell what Ned Healy said to Father Dunphy when his reverence axed him if he was marryin' Katty Brady for love? Ye know her, miss; she's my mother's second cousin, an' is as ould as Methuselah's cat, but a hard-workin', dacent woman."

"No, Mary," said Nora. "What reply did Ned make?"

"He's a very ignorant man," said Mary, with a sly twinkle in her eye. "He answered his riverence: 'No, indeed, then; I'm takin' her to wash my shirt an' mend my duds.'"

"That was very matter-of-fact, Mary," commented Nora. "I shouldn't like to be married for such a reason."

"Oh, *you*, Miss Nora!" said Mary, scandalised at the suggestion. "What good would you be to a man for them purposes?" which, indeed, was quite true, though not according to Mary's meaning.

"If I ever thought of marrying," Mary went on, "I'd take my poor mother's advice."

"What was that, Mary?" asked her mistress.

"Och, she told me to keep the lob safe, and spend it in food for myself." "The lob" was Mary's money-bag. "'He'll ate up all you can give him,' she says; 'but do you have a hearty male behind the door while he's out, an' when he comes in put on a Dianya look an' say: "Sure, I can't touch a bit at all, at all." He'll think more about you.'"

Mary's imitation of the "Dianya look" and the die-away voice was inimitable.

"That's very alarming, Mary," said Nora. "Do you mean to say he'd be better pleased if you eat nothing?"

"That's my opinion, miss," replied Mary emphatically, "and my mother's before me. I've a very small opinion of men, miss," she went on. "I'd like to know where you'd get a man to aiqual the goodness of your aunt, now! Or Mrs. Oliver, let alone that she's a Protestant! Did ye hear, Miss Nora, the settin'-down I gev Joe the saddler?"

Nora had indeed heard it from her window the preceding morning, but had been too dismal to enjoy it. Now she encouraged Mary to tell the story.

"The man's a widdy man, wid six childher, an' I don't say he'd have had the impidence to be cockin' his cap at me if it hadn't been put into his head. I was pluckin' a fowl very quiet in the coal-house, an' Mrs. Quinn was pickin' potatoes outside. She and Joe were discoursin', little knowin' whose ears were open beside them. She began tellin' him about the lob. 'I'd advise ye, Joe,' she says, 'to be lookin' after her. She's yalla, but not ill-lookin', an' she's a strong girl as 'ud keep a tight hand over them gossoons of

yours.' He said nothin', but, like the parrot, he thought the more, for, the next mornin', when I was washin' out the kitchen, he come an' laned over the half-door an' axed a light o' the pipe. 'Get out, you microby!' I said, 'an' don't be fillin' up my kitchen,' an' then, before he could say by your lave, I gave him lamb and salad."

Nora had heard "the lamb and salad" delivered by Mary, leaning over the half-door, while the unfortunate saddler tried to drown her personal remarks by hammering briskly in the harness room.

"I don't think you'll ever marry, Mary," said Nora, attiring herself in her furs.

"'Deed I don't think I will," said Mary. "My opinion of men is too poor. I never could put myself under them like Mrs. Kendrick with John, and the starched shirt she must always have for him on Sundays. An' a rose-bud, no less! An' then Mrs. Quinn with Pat an' the newspapers. She's always 'moiderin' me to put by the papers for him—says Pat Quinn is a scholar an' a gentleman, the foolish ould woman! I'd like well to be workin' for the likes of him, an' he sittin' in bed readin' the papers."

"But he's an invalid, Mary," said Nora.

"I believe 'tis half laziness is on him," said Mary grimly. "If he was mine, I'd see if I couldn't belt him out of bed."

Nora was smiling at this concluding remark as she went downstairs. She carried the little shy, deprecating smile with her into the parlour, where Miss Carew was still at her desk. "Going out, darling?" the latter said, looking up. She was well pleased at Mary's success. "You do well to go out," she went on. "Young people need air and exercise more than an old lazybones like myself."

The world seemed quite a new world when Nora got outside. Though the boughs were dripping, and the fog clinging chillily to her face and hair, she walked along with a brisk sense of exhilaration. She wondered why her world need have been so melancholy a little while ago. She resolved for the thousandth time that the next fit would not find her so easy a victim. She thought of a dozen reasons to make her happy. Next mail day would surely bring her one of Jim's faithful letters. Rags—dear little Rags,—was over his illness, and would soon be trotting after her again. She had those new Liberty patterns

to look over, and her pony, which had been eating his head off for the last few days, must be exercised to-morrow. Perhaps Jessie would come with her for a ride—perhaps Mr. Hilliard, too. Then Mr. Hilliard might give her the new book he had promised her. Her spirits kept going up as she went along, and secure in her loneliness and the fog, she took cheerful little runs now and again, skipping and singing to a tune in her mind, like a child.

She was trotting steadily up the hill to Cromartin when the smell of a cigar suddenly made her pulses beat with a little excitement. In a minute more she came upon Mr. Hilliard, leaning on a gate overlooking the invisible house-tops of Coolevara. He lifted his hat with an eager look of pleasure.

"My cousins are gone to the Rectory to tea," he said, "and I was thinking of coming over to you with Pater's 'Imaginary Portraits,' which I promised to bring. There is a fancy-fair or something of the sort, under discussion, and I wasn't wanted. And Mr. Oliver had business in Limerick, and has been away since early morning. So I was quite lost and stranded."

He looked at her with very eloquent eyes.

Nora blushed and hesitated. She said something about having wanted to see Jessie.

"Oh, that's all right," he said, "for she said to-day she'd ride over to you to-morrow morning, and commissioned me to tell you so. But now, *are* you going to take me back with you and give me some tea? There's no one in the house here, except the maids."

"I suppose so," said Nora; and so they went back the way she had come, through the mist. They didn't go at all so briskly. In fact, they rather dawdled. Nora's first excitement at meeting him had changed to a sense of troubled sweetness. She wanted the walk to be long, and felt guiltily glad when he suggested a *détour*. She didn't want to take him in and share his conversation with Aunt Sylvia. At least, not just yet; though it was delightful, too, to make tea for him from the hissing brass kettle, and to pour it out and hand it to him, scarcely lifting her eyes because of something in his gaze which she was half afraid to meet. She had never felt like that with Jim; with Jim she had always been quite self-possessed. This sweet flurry that set her heart beating in her ears, as she went, was quite a new sensation to her. She talked fast and

nervously, her companion watching her with an intent sideways look. They took the road through a mountain wood high above the House by the Mill. Presently it would begin descending, and would land them on the road that ran by Nora's house-door.

Not a soul was abroad, and dusk was gathering over the landscape. There was a round moon, red as blood, in the fog, and the trees rose ghostly, seeming to grow in mid-air without roots or solid ground. As they came near the wood, it loomed gigantic: the branches of it might have been tapping against the stars. It was a very open wood of slender mountain birch and pine trees that made a lace-like roof overhead, but as the twilight thickened it was eerie, the tall tree shapes looming suddenly out of the mist, and an occasional sound, the snapping of a twig or the scurrying of a rabbit, coming to them muffled out of the wall of vapour.

Once or twice Nora started nervously, and presently her companion, leaning down to her, said, in a curiously intense voice: "Are you frightened? Please take my arm."

The words were the most ordinary, but Nora, as she slipped her little hand on his sleeve,

felt half elated and half frightened. If she had only known, Hilliard was exercising strong control over himself not to put his arm about her. "No," he said to himself, furiously; "don't treat the child like a barmaid, because she happens to be simple and innocent." Nevertheless he drew the soft little hand into his arm, and patted it reassuringly, as he might have done with a child's.

"Now tell me," he said, "what you have been doing with yourself since I've seen you. By-the-way, what an eternity it is! It was a week last Thursday—was it not?"

"Yes," asserted Nora, well-pleased that he should remember exactly. "But Jessie and everyone has forgotten me, since then. I believe I've really been sulking these last few days because no one came near me. I had one of my bad fits, when the fog gets into my heart. I often have them, and I hate myself afterwards, for they make everyone so wretched about me."

"Poor little child!" said the man. "You should never be sad—you with life and love and the world before you."

"But I am very sad at times," said Nora, with a pathetic simplicity. "Aunt Sylvia says its my

health. Aunt Sylvia is so good that she makes excuses for everybody—perhaps it is, but anyhow I do not seem to have the will to fight my depressions, though I make such good resolutions in between. Have you never felt like that?"

"*I!*" said Hilliard, with concentrated bitterness. "When have I felt anything else? I don't cry or sulk, as I might if I were a woman, —I have learned the dull patience that comes when a man knows that the desire of his heart can never be fulfilled. Why, child, if I could be entirely unhappy, there would be some chance for me in this world. As it is, for years and years, I have not known what it is to have sensations like other men; joy or hope or ambition, or even fear. I am like the unhappy soul in the poem,

"'Fallen too low for special fear.'

It will be like that to the end."

Nora did not know what to say in reply to this sudden outbreak. Half-unconsciously she pressed a little closer to him as she would have done with any woman who was troubled. He took up her hand and kissed it. Then he laughed drily, and said:

"Forgive me, you poor child, for frightening you with my heroics! God knows why I've said such things to you! I'm not a sentimental egotist, believe me, and I have not spoken like this for years. I don't know why you drew it out of me, you soft, pretty child," he went on. "You should hear prettier stories than the confidences of a man who gave everything he had to give to a woman who was never his, and who could never in any circumstances have forgotten herself for his sake."

"But," said Nora tremblingly, "if you were good and she was good!"

"Yes," he said, "that ought to comfort me, and does, when I am in my right mind. Yet there is many a time when I feel only rage against myself that I went away from her when she bade me. It seems to me she was mine by every right, the woman God meant for me; and the man who stood between us,—well, I cannot say it to you,—he had outraged her beyond endurance. Comfort! why, my God, I have often thought I lost her because I had not the manhood to seize her and keep her, and leave him like a dog to his vomit!"

"Oh!" said Nora, with a little gasp. "But you would have been much more unhappy if you had made her wicked, and shut her out of heaven."

"I know of no heaven," he said, "but the heaven of love. If she had been mine she could have taught me to believe. I believed when I was a boy, but when she died I gave up believing. No kind God could have wrecked her life and mine."

Nora mentally resolved to pray for him, though she knew she was indolent about praying. It is nearly always a good woman's beginning of love—the fear for a man's soul and the thought of praying for him. But she had forgotten to be shy with him. The feeling of the moment was too intense for that. All the undoubting faith which was her inheritance gave her words to answer him.

"Oh," she said, "you must not say such things. God *is* kind, and loves both you and her. It only seems so strange and cruel because we cannot understand. A good love can never be wasted: God must save it up for us somewhere. You only say such wild things because you are unhappy; and God will forgive you."

She rather wondered at herself when she paused and had time to think, but the words seemed to have come with the occasion.

Hilliard's passionate outburst was over. He said sadly:

"How fortunate you are to have such faith! It must make everything easy. Why, if I believed, if I could believe, that I should meet her again and be happy, I could wait through ages. But your heaven is far away from human thoughts and desires, and you cannot understand how the mere human part of a man cries out for the woman he loves."

"I can understand a little," said Nora quietly. "But I am too ignorant and not good enough to be able to comfort you. My faith is a poor thing in comparison with the faith of others—my aunt's faith, for example, or the faith of Mary Hurley, who went into her convent yesterday with more delight than any earthly bride. I wish you could know their faith—it would help you. But I am sure you must be glad in your innermost heart that you were good and she was good."

Hilliard was not quite sure that he agreed with her, but he made no demur. He felt touched and softened by her innocent kindness. They

walked along in an eloquent silence. Soon they were walking up the wooded avenue to the House by the Mill. The trees met overhead in a thick enlaced mass of boughs. Presently the house loomed, with its cheerful lights, and Nora began to hurry. "I fear we have been a very long time on the way," she said, "and I hope Aunt Sylvia will not be worrying. I did not tell her I thought of going to Cromartin."

"Don't go in for a moment," he said, just before they emerged on the winding gravel-path that led to the hall door; "I want to thank you for being kind to me, for being my little friend and comforter."

He took both her hands and raised them to his lips. She looked at him with her eyes uplifted, her lips parted. A sudden tremor seized the man, something strong and fierce which he thought had been purged out of him years ago. He bent suddenly and kissed her. She gave a little cry, half terror, half something else.

"You shouldn't——" she began, and then sprang back in the darkness and covered her burning face.

"Forgive me," he pleaded, "and don't think me a wretched cad. I couldn't help it." He

stood with his face working, his nostrils quivering. He had to exercise all restraint to keep himself from catching her up in his arms.

She was the first to recover herself. "You had better go away," she said. "I will tell Aunt Sylvia you brought me home, but could not wait."

"Am I to go for ever?" he whispered.

"Oh, no," said Nora; "but you must never, never do that again."

An hour ago she could not have believed she could speak to him with such a little dignified air of reproof, though her heart was beating wildly.

"Let me come in?" he pleaded. "If you send me away I shall not believe that you have forgiven me."

He really was only conscious of the desire to be with her a little longer. So they went in together, Nora with a new air of timorousness and with shyly-bent head.

Miss Sylvia did not require many explanations. She liked Mr. Hilliard, and thought it quite natural that he should have met Nora and escorted her home. It was really quite early, though the night came so soon. Hilliard felt very comfortable when he had put off his damp

overcoat in the hall, and had flung himself in an easy chair by the corner of the fire. He did not look the least bit in the world like a criminal as he sat there nursing Rags, and talking easily to Miss Carew. As for Nora, she was very silent, but more beautiful than ever, with the vivid crimson of her cheeks, and her starry eyes shining under their long, curling lashes. She was only conscious of a vague, exquisite warmth while he remained. When he was gone there would be a sin against Jim to reckon with. Now her heart pushed away that intrusive thought with all its might.

When Hilliard went Miss Carew was cordial in pressing him to return, and he had arranged for the ride the next day and some expeditions for the week following. Of Nora Miss Carew never thought, except to be glad the child was having a little pleasant life and society. Nora was an engaged girl, and in her aunt's unsophisticated eyes was as good as married. She would never have dreamt of insulting her niece by the thought that she could be faithless to Jim Hurley. So the steps of Nora's backsliding were made easy for her.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PRIMROSE PATH.

FOR the next month or so Nora lived between joy and despair, between a radiant intoxicating warmth, which made all the winter world bloom and sing, and a cold sickness that took her in quiet hours and filled her with a horrid repulsion for the man and herself and Jim and all the world. She thought of Jim now as the condemned thinks of the executioner. Her sense of wrong toward him made her afraid. Sometimes in the night she would cover her face with her hands and fancy his stern face as he looked down at her and heard her trembling confession, and she would shake with cold terror. Then she would put away the thought of him with both hands, and turn to the memory of Hilliard that day, and the days that went before, of his kisses, of the ardour of his voice and eyes, of the turn of his head, of a thousand little tricks of movement and gesture which thrilled her to recall. She kept herself drugged with her love: always at

the back of it she felt unspeakably wicked—disproportionably wicked, a more sophisticated person would say. The passion in herself, and Hilliard's growing passion for her, repelled and frightened her, yet intoxicated her, too. Then the hiddenness of it frightened her. Nora was usually full of confidences to the people she was fond of. How often and how long she had chattered of Jim to Jessie Oliver and to her Aunt Sylvia! But about this love, which she feared horribly, and yet feared more to have taken from her, she was as secret as a bird which builds its nest near the ground. She was ever alert lest suspicion should be awakened. It was part of her physical weakness that she should feel so desperately afraid even of those who could have no possible right to interfere with her. In these days she grew so clever in dissimulation that no one suspected her, though as Hilliard's passion grew, she had to be careful for two.

There was the first time they met after the episode of the kiss. It was a couple of days later, and the Oliver girls were taking Hilliard to explore a big house of the neighbourhood, Lord Westsea's mansion, which was full of beautiful things covered up in holland swathings from the

light of day. Lord Westsea's father had been a famous collector, and the bulk of his treasures were lodged in Caracon Castle, but his heir preferred Piccadilly, and was long in ranging himself by matrimony. For a couple of weeks in the year he filled Caracon with gay bachelors like himself, but the rest of the year it was given over to Mrs. Bennett, the housekeeper, and her damsels, and the great reception rooms were dark and silent.

The Olivers knew every inch of the house as thoroughly as they knew their own. They were free to come and go in it as they liked, and Mrs. Bennett never troubled to drag her old bones up the wide stairs when the young ladies from Cromartin were showing their company through the house. It was one of the few entertainments the neighbourhood afforded for the Olivers' stray town visitors, and the girls derived considerable enjoyment from showing off Lord Westsea's treasures, drawing up the blinds to let in daylight on the rich, dim rooms, whisking the covers from the pictures, lifting a corner of a holland bag to display the rose and azure tendrils of a Venetian chandelier, displaying the priceless china, the old silver, the wonderful glass old Lord Westsea

had ransacked the world for. There is a more subtle pleasure in being the guide than the person guided, and the girls always felt their importance. Great was the moment to each of them when they led the sated visitor into a dim alcove of the shrouded drawing room, and, letting in the light, displayed the Raphael, the wonder of radiant and heavenly maternity, before which the most sceptical might bend the knee. There, year after year, Mother and Babe bloomed in that hidden recess. There was a way of lighting it from the side invisibly, and when Caracon was open and gaiety sparkled from morning till night, the unveiled picture was screened away from the revellers by heavy curtains, within which you felt as in a church. Under those eyes, deep with maternity, and those hands which held the blessed Babe between earth and heaven, nineteenth century gossip and amusements would be wofully out of place, so Lord Westsea had consulted his friends' comfort as well as his own sense of the fitness of things in screening the picture away.

Nora had not been included in the plan for visiting Caracon, but it was easy for Hilliard to put the idea in Jessie's mind that she should be included. Jessie thought, indeed, that the sugges-

tion came from herself. The House by the Mill was somewhat out of the way, but the afternoon was yet early when they started. Nora was mourning in her room when they arrived, but Mary, who had always keen sympathy for her young mistress's moods, brought her the news in elephantine leaps up the creaking stairs.

"Ask them to sit in the parlour till I come to them," said Nora, all in a trembling commotion. Her aunt was away at her weekly duty of dressing the altar in Coolevara chapel, and Nora had been sitting with her hands before her, going over for the thousandth time every word Hilliard had said the preceding evening, and trembling again as she remembered his kiss.

She came downstairs very shyly and coldly out of her dreams. Hilliard looked at her, and misunderstood her. "Ah!" he said, "the little lady has not forgiven me for forgetting myself last night, and I am a confounded fool!" When they got outside he walked ahead with May, and Nora and Jessie were left behind. He was fond of his young cousins almost equally, though he shared thoughts with the keener-witted Jessie he would never lay bare to May. May was very like her mother, and he appreciated her softness, her

dignity, her clear sense of duty, and the virginal austerity that seemed to him an admirable thing in a young girl. She would never make a man forget himself like the little girl who had been so warm last night and was so cold to-day, but she would be a tender wife and mother, an admirable house-mistress, an honest friend, an open-handed dispenser of bounties. Her way in the world would be quite straight, if a little narrow, but over the bounds her feet would never desire to stray. He talked with a cheerful, brotherly fondness as they walked along, while, a little way behind, Nora wondered what they were talking of, and let the unconscious Jessie chatter for once to closed ears.

She felt a little cold over his self-possessed greeting of her, and his easy passing to May's side. Still she thought to herself that he could not well have left the sisters to walk together, and a timid hope sprang up in her heart that things would be all right when they reached the castle, and that he would look at her and speak to her in a way that would show he had not forgotten last night. He had seemed so fond of her then, and so grateful for the comfort she had given him, and he had spoken to her of himself

and his troubles in a way she was quite, quite sure he had never spoken to the cousins he had known all his life. Alas! poor Nora! He seemed to have no more desire for her society when they had arrived at Caracon than before. He strolled lazily by May's side through the long rooms and corridors. He inspected the pictures and curios with the interest of an expert, and really enjoyed his sight-seeing. The Oliver girls were delighted with him, for he not only appreciated their entertainment, but he brought out easily from his knowledge entertainment for them. They were shamefully ignorant of Limoges and Battersea enamels. They knew nothing at all about the periods of china and its marks; very little of Dürer or Mantegna prints. Nora, too, was drawn in to listen, but the talk of things she did not understand served to push her farther into the darkness and coldness which were gathering about her heart. Jessie rallied her on her silence, and then got pitiful. She took one of Nora's little cold hands and squeezed it warmly. This was when they were standing before the Madonna, and the little alcove was a glory of light and warmth to frame that immortal beauty.

The everlasting eyes but made the girl's heart feel colder with the vague sense of shame and guilt that was pressing on it. After they had turned away from the Raphael and locked the dark drawing-room, she dropped down on a window-seat in the corridor.

"Do you go on," she pleaded to her friend, "and let me rest till you come back. I am tired. I can't go on."

"You poor little thing!" said Jessie, putting a strong young arm round her; "have we been half killing you? No, indeed, I won't leave you to the hobgoblins in this great lonely corridor. Besides I know the house by heart."

Hilliard looked back indifferently and then strolled on by May's side. Poor little Nora! if she could have only felt angry against him, but she was too depressed and mortified for anger. She tried to pluck up a little bit of spirit when he had gone, but unsuccessfully. Jessie kept her arm round her fondly, and was full of repentance for having over-tired her friend. Presently the other two came back, and after they had locked up, they went down to a warm cup of tea by Mrs. Bennett's fire. Nora, in her dim corner, kept her eyes on her lap, but was very

conscious of Hilliard's sitting on the arm of May's chair, and attending to her wants assiduously. Once or twice he came to Nora's corner, helping her to things, which she took in a little frozen way. He stooped once and asked if she was very tired; he felt vaguely tender to her dimmed beauty, for unhappiness did not sit well on Nora. But she answered him in a voice which the effort to keep steady had made formal; and with a surer conviction that her coldness was meant to punish him he went back to May and his affectionate care of her.

On the homeward way he walked with Jessie and left Nora and May together. May never troubled Nora to talk much; there was not very much sympathy between them, and she was not painfully anxious over her companion's dumps as Jessie would have been. She concluded Nora had found the afternoon dull, and was too indolent not to show it. Codger scampered by them, making incursions into every coppice after sparrows, squirrels, rabbits, or whatever else he saw moving or heard rustling. The dog made a little conversation for them as dogs always do, and they got briskly over the frozen ground. When they reached the gate, at the foot of the

winding ascent to the House by the Mill, they found Jessie and Hilliard waiting to bid Nora good-bye.

"Can you not come in?" Nora faltered with a sick sense of the finality of this afternoon's miserable events.

"No, Noreen darling, we can't," replied Jessie; "we'll only just be home in time for dinner, and our rector and his wife are coming this evening. You won't be afraid, dear, going up there, through those dark trees?"

"Oh, no," said Nora, with a wan smile, "I am never afraid."

She gave them each a little cold hand of farewell, not lifting her eyes to Hilliard as she came to him. Then she turned and went quickly up the climbing road. She was glad to be alone, and after a minute or two she slackened her pace and let the heavy tears of mortification and disappointment come into her eyes; hot and stinging they were after this long repression. She felt it a great relief to be alone, and she had a dread of going in to her aunt, and having to answer questions; she wished the evening were well over, and that she was safe in her own little room with no eye upon her.

Suddenly the sound of a man's feet running brought her heart into her mouth. She was not startled in the ordinary way. So far as mortals were concerned Nora would walk the glen alone at midnight, but she knew at once it was Hilliard, and her heart began to beat wildly, while she tried to brush away her tears, and to smooth her face to a conventional expression. He began a lame explanation as he came up to her, but his voice suddenly altered. He caught at her hands.

"No," he said, "I won't trump up an excuse for you, though I've had to do it for my fair cousins, whom I've left waiting for me. I've come back to ask—to ask whether you've found this afternoon as deadly dull and disappointing as I have."

He bent down to her face, but Nora suddenly covered her eyes with both hands and sobbed with a violence that was half relief after the strain of the last few miserable hours.

"Don't, child!" he said, putting his arm about her. "Don't cry, dear, dear little girl. You are not crying for a wretched fellow like me, surely?"

Nora whispered through her tears: "Go, your cousins will be waiting for you. And, indeed,

you ought not to be with me at all, nor to put your arm round me. It isn't right."

"Not right, sweet," he said, half laughing. "It wouldn't be right if I did not. But I must go, as you say. There is no time for our explanation, and my cousins will think I have stayed inordinately long already. But I must see you, if only to find out whether you mean to banish me. Will you take your walk to-morrow by the Fairies' Waterfall? I know it is a favourite haunt of yours, and I, too, have found my way there. Will you, will you?" he asked eagerly.

"Oh, no!" faltered Nora, "I'm sure I must not."

He looked down into the face that was drooped like a flower heavy with rain.

"Very well," he said, "don't promise. But I shall be there. And now give me a kiss so that the afternoon may at least end sweetly."

He lifted her face by the chin and kissed her tender mouth with an ardour that amazed himself. Then he put her out of his arms by force, as it would seem, and in a minute or two the echoes of his running feet on the shining ground died away. Nora stood where he left her with her hands clasped on her breast and her mind and heart in a tremor, out of which no definite thought could

come. She stood so for several minutes, while the frosty moon smiled out in the sky. She felt no cold. Her cheeks burned, and her lips yet felt those passionate kisses. She went in absent-mindedly, and went slowly upstairs to take off her outdoor things. When she had lit her candles, she sat down with her chin on her hand and looked at herself in the glass. There was not a vein in her body that was not pulsing with exquisite life. She tried to look at her face in an impersonal way, to see herself as he had seen her. Then she laughed with pleasure as the glow of her beauty softly rose in the glass. She leant and kissed herself, and the chill contact of her lips with the glass startled her.

There came a knock at the door. It was Mary with a message. "Your aunt says, miss, are you ready for your tea?" Nora answered her in a voice she had to keep low and deliberate, lest the joy in it should be too manifest. She knew she would see to-morrow the man who had so suddenly captivated her imagination. She knew that she would probably have many alternations of feeling betwixt to-night and to-morrow, but in the end she had no doubt her walk would lead her by the Fairies' Waterfall. She fastened a few bright

berries in her dress and went downstairs softly singing. She gave her father and her aunt quite an animated account of Caracon and its treasures. All that evening she was gentler and more caressing than usual.

Nora was a creature of one mood for the time being. It was part of her childishness. That evening she gave herself up to joy, and pushed into the very farthest corner of her mind the thought of Jim and the wrong she was doing him. Perhaps the sense that she had no right to her joy made it, in a manner, more exquisite, because there is always a flavour about the forbidden fruit that the lawful misses.

The night post was brought by Lanty Daly at nine o'clock. Lanty was a red-haired, freckled urchin who went messages and did odd jobs for the House by the Mill, a boy who had an incredible talent for "mitching." Everything on the way distracted him, and he went a bit of the road with every friend he met. To-night he was punctual for once, but Nora could have forgiven him for playing truant. There was only one letter, and that one with the familiar Indian stamp, for herself. The sight of it pricked the airy bubble of her dreams. She took it from Mary, who had

good-naturedly, and with prodigious excitement, come running up the stairs with it, and put it into her pocket. Then she kissed her aunt, and, saying she was tired, took her candle and went upstairs.

Miss Carew thought she understood that the child wanted to read her love letter by herself. She lifted up the clustering rings of hair from Nora's forehead, and kissed it with a love and tenderness that made the kiss a blessing. Poor Nora, her aunt knew little how that letter had set the still small voice whispering in her heart!

Upstairs, Nora placed the letter on a little table, where it lay prominently white in the candlelight. She was in no hurry to read it, and she wished vainly that Lanty had not been so punctual, so that the letter might have stood over till morning. She was afraid of it. It seemed to her like accuser and judge in one. Very slowly she put on her warm dressing-gown, and thrust her feet into her wadded slippers. Then she took her letter gingerly and opened it.

It was such a letter as she had many of from him, a quiet, manly, tender letter, more like a man's letter to his wife than to his sweetheart.

Jim Hurley had never been a very demonstrative lover, and he had no conception at all of the passionate heart of his little mistress, which, indeed, he had never been able to waken. But Nora knew well that his was an honest, faithful love, on which a woman might lean securely all her life. The other man meant all kinds of romance to her—such romance as she had read of in books, but never thought of as coming to ordinary human folk, and, least of all, to her humdrum corner of the world. The story of his long faithfulness to the dead woman had captivated her fancy before she had seen him. Then his manner to herself was so alluring that she felt actually as if he were drawing her heart from her. If she had never known anything but Jim's quiet love and her own affection for and belief in him, she felt she would have lost something that for the time gave her mortality wings. She thought of Hilliard reading poetry:

"Is this the face that launched a thousand ships?"

Why, there had been as great a passion in his voice this evening when he spoke to her as though she had been that wonderful woman in the poem!

She read the letter through conscientiously, and then put it down. She sighed for the peace of her tenderness toward Jim, which she had taken to be love. There was no peace in this new feeling, which was half love, half hate, or at least repulsion.

She put the letter away carefully with its fellows, and prepared to go to bed. She felt both cold and wretched after reading her lover's unsuspicious letter. Just as she was getting into bed she heard a tiny scratching at the door. It was Rags, and she took him in and into her arms, putting her face down on his little yellow back. The puppy seemed to understand she was troubled and wriggled round to lick her face. Nora kissed him and put him outside her door; then she crept into bed, and lay staring before her at the dim rosy light she kept burning on her little altar.

She said her prayers, praying as usual that she might be good and wise for Jim. How often she had fallen asleep with his letters in her hand. To-night she whispered her prayers hurriedly and without heart. She felt she had no right to her prayers with that meeting of to-morrow before her. She ought to pray, she knew, for strength

to resist this temptation, but she would not pray, fearing least she should be heard. After to-morrow she would be faithful, she resolved, and would pray hard, and would not see Mr. Hilliard any more. And some time she would tell Jim, when they were married and she had made him happy and sure of her. She would tell him it was only a temptation, and that she had put it away, and had never really loved anyone but him. This thought came to her after two or three hours of restlessness, and she fell asleep, feeling quite virtuous. To-morrow she would say good-bye to Mr. Hilliard forever, would tell him he must go back to London and forget her, and she would forget him. The pathos of their parting made her lashes wet as she slept.

Of course they met on the morrow, and Nora tried to be very dignified and resolute with him. He was not at all without conscience as regarded her. He had indeed been calling himself a scoundrel at intervals since yesterday evening. Yet he was not quite prepared to make this their last meeting.

"I know you are right," he said, "and we have both been very naughty, though it is all my fault.

But let me down easily. Don't forbid me to see you while I stay, which cannot be much longer. The other man will have you all his life. Give me my hour."

Of course Nora gave him his hour, and really felt quite purged of her fault when she tied him up severely, forbidding him even to kiss her hands or to hold them. Poor little Nora! it was hard to be angry with her. St. Edmund Hilliard had fascinated many women, though none had fascinated him since his dead Helen. And now he was putting himself at the feet of a little country girl with only her beauty and dawning passion for himself to recommend her.

"Don't be hard on me," he pleaded. "You have made me care to be with you and to see you, and you are the only woman since——"

He strolled homeward by the river with her, and behaved admirably. He talked to her about himself and his life, with a quiet and tender confidence that had nothing in it to frighten her. He was so good and careful that the kiss at parting seemed only a part of their friendship. Nora felt she was safe now in not forbidding him her

presence, especially as he had said such things about the comfort she was to him, and the boon a good woman's friendship is to a man. How many men have so deluded themselves and women since the world began.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WORLD AND THE CLOISTER.

THE year turned round to Christmas, and still Hilliard lingered at Cromartin. The Olivers were the most hospitable people, and were only too pleased that he should stay, and flattered, too, since he preferred them to all the London gaieties. He was constantly making resolutions to go, and then allowing himself to be persuaded to stay. He was a most pleasant visitor—never in the way when he wasn't wanted; always ready to be pleased at their small amusements; so tenderly courteous and considerate to Mrs. Oliver and her daughters, that the lamentations were quite genuine when he seriously spoke of departing. To do him justice, he had several times resolved to go, to take himself out of the way of temptation, and leave the little girl to her lawful allegiance. When he was away from Nora, and in cold blood looked at the situation, he confounded himself for a fool and a scoundrel. He realised that she was not of his class, and in those

early days never thought of anything so wild as marrying her. In his treatment of her there was no deliberate cowardice or cruelty. It was simply that when he was with her she allured him out of his good resolutions; the look in her eyes as she lifted them to him went to his head like wine. He put away the suggestion of his conscience, that he was behaving badly to that unknown man in India. He thought of him with a half-conscious contempt, as not of his class. "D——n the fellow!" he said, "he can't care for the sweet little girl, or he'd pitch his scientific investigations to the devil, and come home and marry her."

There were many times when Nora, too, could have wished for less scientific fervour in her lover; times when all her heart rose in rebellion against the man who was her unauthorised lover; times when she hated the passion she had inspired in him, as every girl hates and fears a man's passion in early days, when it is but dimly comprehended. There were times when her memories of Jim's strong, kindly love were as of something sane and clean and wholesome by the side of the tumult of Hilliard's feeling for her. In a way her revulsions of feeling against him

held Hilliard as no steady glow would have done. There was something piquant in the coldness of a girl, who, a few hours before, had been warm and trembling. There were times when he came to the House at the Mill, and while he remained, the little *chatelaine* sat stiffly in her arm-chair, and refused to come from behind her entrenchments of silence and coldness. Nora's moods helped to conceal the state of things from the outside world. Once she even rose and went out of the room during his visit, and came back no more. If he had but known she was crying upstairs over Jim's picture. Miss Carew apologised for her gently, when Hilliard rose to go, after waiting as long as he could, decently. "You must excuse my niece," she said, "she is not very strong, and we indulge her greatly."

As he buttoned his coat, going out in the frosty night, he had almost resolved never to come back, but the temptation of seeing that little icy face soften and burn for him was too much. The very next evening there was a reconciliation. Hilliard knew where to wait for her on her afternoon walks, and he had grown fond of taking his gun and going out after lunch, so that his absences were not noticed at Cromartin.

When he came striding to meet Nora over the bracken, she was in a mood to make up with him. That evening she let him put his arms round her, and kiss her, and reproach her as he would. After the reconciliation they walked along the dusky road, hand in hand, quite at peace with the world and each other. Such times were best of all.

Christmas Day came, and the Olivers' breakfast table was heaped with many parcels. Hilliard's gifts were just what each one wanted, for had he not been industriously, for some time before, seeking to discover what should best please his dear cousins? For Mrs. Oliver there was a set of Ruskin in purple morocco. For May a sable muff, for Jessie a scarlet leather writing-case. Mr. Oliver's new pigskin saddle of the most improved make was a delightful surprise, and was, indeed, much needed. It gave Hilliard great pleasure to hear the shrieks of delight with which the girls discovered their gifts. Mr. Oliver was affectionately severe.

"Dear boy," he said, "your gifts are too munificent. I don't feel quite happy in accepting mine, at all events."

"They are nothing, nothing at all," protested

Hilliard; "and it is sweet for a lonely man to have kind cousins to receive his unworthy offerings."

In the afternoon he begged Jessie's company for a walk. May was too busy with her Christmas cards and parcels to go with them. It was a bright December afternoon of pale sunshine, and the frosty road sparkled under their feet as they walked. Hilliard had asked for Jessie's company with a design, for yesterday Nora had refused to arrange any meeting with him. She had promised to visit Mary Hurley at the convent which she had entered some weeks ago. Hilliard had acquiesced in her going, but with a vague jealousy of the Hurley connection. But to-day he wanted especially to see Nora, and it was useless to look for a walk alone with her, when Coolevara folk were out in holiday attire. The roads, so quiet of an ordinary afternoon, were on Sundays and such high festivals as this thronged with the townspeople.

They walked quite naturally toward the glen; it was the favourite walk of the neighbourhood. As Hilliard had suspected, Jessie soon suggested that they should go and see Nora.

"I want to see the little mouse's Christmas boxes, and tell her of mine." And at the memory of her scarlet writing-case, she squeezed Hilliard's arm affectionately with her two hands.

"Don't, Jess," he said, laughing, "or the people will think we're courting." Then he answered her suggestion, feeling something of a hypocrite: "I thought I heard you say that Miss Halloran had some special engagement for Christmas Day."

"Oh, of course she has, poor old Nora!" said Jessie, to whom, indeed, Nora had written as much. "She has to visit her future sister-in-law at the convent."

But at a turn of the road they came upon Nora, "stepping westward" briskly, with the scarlet of the waning sun lighting her hair and eyes, and a delightful colour in her cheeks. Jessie gave her an enthusiastic greeting. Nora had blushed furiously when she saw her, but the blush excited no suspicion in Jessie's mind. She knew girls who blushed at being spoken to, or at meeting the merest acquaintances, and she put the embarrassment down to the account of Nora's youthfulness. Actually they were nearly of an age, but theo-

retically she looked upon Nora as a score of years her junior.

"Well, Noreen," she said, "are you going to your convent? How I wish you could take me! I have never been inside a convent, and I should like to see that pretty Miss Hurley in a nun's dress."

Jessie had no idea of being taken at her word, but Hilliard caught at the suggestion.

"Would you take us, Miss Halloran?" he said. "The convent is as mysterious a place to me, though less alarming, as to the most orthodox Protestant that ever illumined Exeter Hall."

He was watching Nora's face, suffused with a lovely shy colour. She stammered and hesitated, but Jessie broke in:

"Oh, no, we couldn't—at least I couldn't! Mother would faint, perhaps, at the idea, though father wouldn't mind a bit. Father knows the nuns well, and has a tremendous admiration for Sister Agatha, who, he says, is the best man of business in the county. He ought to know, for he buys her calves every year. Mother doesn't believe in escaped nuns, you know, but she would think it a tremendous departure for me to visit a convent."

"I'm afraid Miss Halloran won't take me alone?" said Hilliard, scrutinising Nora's changing face.

"Oh, I daren't!" said Nora, laughing. "The nuns would think it *too* advanced of me."

Hilliard turned to his cousin. "Come, Jessie," he said, "I'll take all the blame. But didn't Carrie visit this very convent when she was staying here? I know she brought back some lace she had bought at a convent."

"So she did," said Jessie. "Father brought her to see their lace-making. The nuns give him a great many wrinkles about the cottage industries he's so keen upon. But mother thinks father can do no wrong. What would be right in him would be revolutionary in me, and she already thinks me too revolutionary."

However, Jessie did want very much to see the inside of a convent, and she was finally persuaded to make the expedition, justifying herself by the argument that what was right in her father could not be very wrong in her.

The convent was a pretty structure of gray stone, with Gothic windows filled in with diamond panes, and a wide oak door, at which the visitors rang loudly. The gray walls were almost hidden

by rose trees and many creeping plants, and in this sheltered place there was still a bloom of pale, late roses. Presently they heard the rustle of a robe, and, after an inspection through a grating, the door was opened by an apple-faced lay sister, who gave Nora the warmest of greetings, for was not Nora a child of the house?

The hall ran at right angles to a corridor, lined with brown wood, and dim, since the low sun came through coloured windows. Opposite to them was a statue in a niche, with flowers, and a little rosy light burning before it. The lay sister, holding Nora's hand tightly, ushered them into a high, bare parlour, which the wood fire made cheerful. The lower part of the walls was panelled, but above, on the whitewash, there were some pictures of saints. A big crucifix was over the mantelpiece, and in a cupboard with glass doors there were scapulars, rosaries, holy water fonts, and little statuettes of the saints. The floor was of brown wood polished to glassiness. The horse-hair chairs stood at regular intervals around the wall. There was nothing of redundance, nothing for luxury; but the high bright room smelt of cleanliness.

Hilliard was still staring about him when the door opened, and Mother St. Vincent, the Reverend Mother of Star of the Sea, came in, leading her girl postulant by the hand. Mary Hurley had a close-fitting black cap on her luxuriant hair, and a veil of some silky material floated from it about her shoulders. Her dress was an ordinary black gown of the poorest make, but she looked more radiant than any bride, and her happiness seemed to float with her like an atmosphere.

Mother St. Vincent was very tall, and the trailing black robes seemed to make her taller. Her face was the most statuesque Hilliard had ever seen, and its beauty was so perfect as to be almost cold. Her mouth was very tender in its expression, and on her face brooded the rapt look of peace and purity which is the inheritance of every nun. The warm whiteness of her face shone out radiantly from its environment of starched linen and dull black serge. She had been a great lady in the world, but she had never looked more stately than in her strait nun's habit, with her brass crucifix, her rosary, and the gold ring of her mystic espousals for all ornament.

Hilliard was fascinated by her. When she had greeted the two girls with benignant motherli-

ness, she sat by him and talked to him of the world outside, leaving her young postulant to talk to her contemporaries. Mother St. Vincent, like every nun, was right glad to catch echoes from the world she had left. She only read just so much as was necessary, but she was very glad when anyone came her way who could tell her of the movements of the best part of the world which she had once adorned, of how things wagged in art and literature, politics and science. Hilliard found himself talking to her quite without awe, and telling her the last news of London as he might some gracious woman of the world, who had been travelling in regions inaccessible to newspapers. It was strange to find anyone so ready of intellect, so eagerly interested, whose knowledge had yet stopped at a dozen years ago. She plied him with questions for quite a long time, till at last he said laughingly:

"But I can never tell you half what you want to know. I must come again, Mother St. Vincent, if I may."

"Pray, do!" said the nun.

Just then there was a little tinkle somewhere inside the convent. Mary Hurley started and listened, then looked at her superior.

"Yes; go, child!" said Mother St. Vincent. "That is your bell."

After the young postulant had left them, a lay sister brought delicious coffee and rolls. Jessie told her family afterward that the room, with the fragrance of the coffee, smelt sweeter than a bed of violets. Anyhow, Sister Gabrielle's coffee was exceedingly good.

After they had taken their coffee the Reverend Mother said: "If you would like to see our Christmas tree I can take you through the school quarters, but much of the house is enclosed, that is, none but the religious can enter it. It is all very familiar to you, Nora, dear child, but perhaps Mr. Hilliard and Miss Oliver would like to penetrate so far."

Mr. Hilliard and Miss Oliver did like very much. In fact, both felt quite agreeably excited. They went along the dusky corridor, seeing in the distance a white veil or a black veil that glided out of their path. The corridor ran round a tiny cloister, and now the full moon was up they could see the square grass plots and the rose bushes that tapped against the windows.

They went up a broad flight of stairs to the schoolroom, which bore a festal air. At one end

red curtains screened off a stage, for the week after Christmas was to be occupied with plays, charades, and concerts. At the other end stood a Christmas tree, with a little German angel at the top blowing a trumpet, and looking down upon all the pretty and useful things that would be balloted for to-morrow. In the middle of the room, between two long rows of desks, there was a group of schoolgirls, all in black, and wearing variously-coloured ribbons with medals round their shoulders. They were surrounding a poor woman and child, and a rather shame-faced man who stood awkwardly with his cap in his hand, and looked at the ground.

"We have interrupted a little ceremony," said Mother St. Vincent, pausing at the door. "We dress a poor family every year in honour of the Holy Family."

The two heretics looked on with awe. The girls in the group were visibly fluttered, and broke into nervous schoolgirl tittering when Codger, who had accompanied the party, burst into their ring. Jessie had a chase to recapture him, and when that was achieved they followed Mother St. Vincent downstairs again.

"You must bring Miss Oliver and Mr. Hilliard

again, Nora," said Mother St. Vincent. "I should like them to see the industrial school and the lacemakers and embroiderers at work. Meanwhile,"—they had reached the parlour door and she had opened it for them,—"I will take Mr. Hilliard to see the Titian in our chapel, and Sister Mary has come down to say good-bye! I think some of your friends are waiting to see you too, Nora."

Through the open door Hilliard caught a glimpse of many black and white veils. Then she brought him to the lighted chapel to see the great picture which was part of her convent dowry. Hilliard examined and admired it, and by the time they returned the Angelus bell was ringing; it was six o'clock. The Reverend Mother stood in the corridor and crossed herself, and during the little space she remained in prayer Hilliard watched her with grave sympathy. There seemed to him a poetry in the hush and dim lights of the convent, in the black robe and white beauty of the nun, beside which the outside world seemed garish. When they had reached the parlour door the Reverend Mother opened it, and he saw the two girls emerge from the embraces of many black veils and gowns. There was a de-

lightful, low flutter of laughter going on amid those mysterious hidden woman.

When they turned from the doorstep Jessie explained: "I wish you could have been with us, St. Edmund, though I suppose the young nuns wouldn't have come down in their numbers if you had been. When they knelt to say the Angelus as the bell rang, Codger thought it was a new game and started to jumping upon them. You should see the poor nuns striving to keep their countenances, with indifferent success. That hilarious-looking young one you called Sister Cecilia, Nora, went off in irrepressible shrieks. What children your nuns are, Nora?"

"Oh, yes!" acquiesced Nora; "they used even to enjoy things at which we schoolgirls professed to turn up our noses. Poor little Cecilia could never keep her face in class when we impudently made jokes, though she might be really concerned at our malpractices."

"Happy nuns!" sighed the world-worn Jessie. "I suppose it is the merry spirit keeps your Sister Cecilia her rose and white skin, and her soft red lips and tiny white teeth. I have never seen such white teeth except Codger's."

"Nuns never grow old," said Nora. "At least

they are quite old women before they lose their youthful look."

The lights of the town glittered through the frosty twilight, little warm specks of gold by contrast with the silver Lady Moon who sailed in high heaven. The contrast reminded Hilliard vaguely of the difference between hearth and cloister. The earth lights were lower and less glorious—little dancing glow-worms below in the valley—but for the one who would choose the austere splendour in the heavens, how many would be drawn by the warm earth lights.

They left Jessie at the gate of Cromartin.

"Miss Halloran and I are going to break the record to the glen," said Hilliard, "but if I am a little late for dinner, Jessie, ask your mother to forgive me. Come, Miss Halloran, we must race for it!" and he took Nora's hand, and raced with her laughing down the hill road.

Jessie gazed after them, wondering. "Dear me!" she said to herself, "what a boy St. Edmund is growing! I remember when we used to look upon him as such a very dignified person."

The two walked briskly till they were in sight of the House by the Mill. As they drew

near it they heard a distant clock strike half-past six.

"You must leave me now," said Nora, with her head drooping. "You will have to run quickly and get to Cromartin in time for dinner."

"You have not wished me a happy Christmas," he said, as he looked down at the bent head. Nora answered nothing, and he lifted her face by the chin and kissed her, first on the lips, then on both of her closed eyes, again on her little white neck just above the fur collar.

He put his arm round her because she seemed so languid and inert. It gave him exquisite satisfaction to feel that her love for him so affected her. At the moment he felt that she was worth anything to him; it came to him like a shock that he was feeling more for her than he had felt for the woman in whose grave he thought he had buried his heart. He took up one of her languid hands. There was a twisted bracelet on the wrist, of red rough gold, plainly of Eastern make. He was conscious of a jealous desire to remove it, but he controlled himself.

"Did this come to-day, little Nora?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, opening her eyes in a startled way; "it is pretty, is it not?"

"No," he said; "not pretty enough for you. I have something prettier. I waited till now to offer my Christmas gift."

He took a case from his pocket and handed it to her, hoping to see the delight in her eyes, and to hear her soft cry of pleasure. Nora opened the case. As she did something sparkled in the moon-rays, coldly brilliant with scarlet, green, and azure. It was a half-hoop diamond bracelet of great beauty and value. Hilliard, with affected carelessness, lit a cigarette while she gazed, in fascination he thought, at the shining gaud. He took two or three puffs; still she said nothing. At last he broke silence.

"Well, little girl, are you going to thank me in the way I like best?"

She lifted her eyes very slowly and looked at him. Her expression was entirely changed. She looked like Nora grown up, he thought to himself, half startled. She held the bracelet toward him still with that grave silent gaze.

"Take it," she said, "till you have answered me a question."

Hilliard took the bracelet awkwardly, and waited for what she might say.

CHAPTER X.

A QUESTION AND A RECALL.

WHEN Nora spoke there was something hard and distinct in her voice, a note of accusation that thrilled Hilliard with a sense of guilt. He would have stepped nearer to her but she waved him off with a quite strange imperativeness. What marvel had been wrought in the girl, who, a few moments ago, had been so helpless under his caresses?

"I want you to tell me," she said, with a pathetic dignity, "whether, if I were free to marry you, you would have asked me to be your wife."

Hilliard replied nothing. He seemed to realise for the first time the wrong he had done her, and how he had made her care for him and yield herself up to his kisses just for his own selfish pleasure. She stood looking at him in the moonlight, with all the tender childish curves of her face tense and rigid.

"Nora! Nora!" he said at last, stretching his hands to her.

"No!" she said, keeping him off. "Answer me, answer me!"

The man stammered and hesitated. She came quite close to him and looked in his ashamed face. Then she uttered a moan, as if he had hurt her.

"Oh, you would not!" she said. "You were only playing with me all the time."

Hilliard caught her in his arms, but she struck him with her small fist on the breast and wrenched herself from him. He sprang after her, and she turned and fled. In her flight and his pursuit there was an equal blindness and purposelessness. She wanted to get away from him and hide her hurt and lost self-respect; he, with a half-rage against her, had a wild desire to kiss her and make her his again.

The old mill buildings rose stark and ghastly, with the moonlight shining through the blank eyes of windows and the half-ruinous upper walls. Toward them Nora flew like a hare, scarcely knowing whither her feet were carrying her. The place was utterly silent, save for the lowing of the cattle in the cattle shed. The

men were by their own hearthstones this Christmas night, and old Michael Halloran was nodding by the fire opposite his sister-in-law, and wondering what could keep his little girl so late at the convent.

Nora flew through the yard full of black shadows, which at other times would have terrified her. At the yawning door to the old mill she looked back over her shoulder. Hilliard was following her closely, calling as he came: "For God's sake, come back! Nora! Nora!" She did not hear him. She had only a wild horror and fear of him and his caresses. It was just as if she had stood at the edge of sin and looked down into its depths. Their intercourse had been absolutely innocent, except of disloyalty, but this passion to which she had yielded, a passion unsanctified and unlighted by any thought of marriage, seemed to burn and sear her like dishonour itself. What was her fear of the mill, of the death-traps in its broken floors and rotten ladders, compared to her fear of him.

She disappeared through the black door before he could reach her. He followed, stumbling over rotten and shiny refuse,—once he swerved sud-

denly from the black mouth of an open well. In the darkness of the mill he could see nothing. He struck a match and peered about him. There was no sound in the place, and overhead he could see the rotten rafters showing great gaps in the floor above. His rage cooled down in an anguish of fear. Cold sweat came out on his forehead in drops. He went everywhere, calling her softly by name, striking matches to peer into dark corners. She was nowhere.

At last he espied in a corner a green and rotten ladder, swinging by iron clamps from a square opening overhead. It was the way to the upper floor, and by that way she must have gone. He shuddered as he saw the broken rungs and the great distance to that black mouth, but it was of her he was thinking: he was not conscious of any danger for himself. He shook the ladder and found that the clamps held. His athletic training stood him now to good purpose. He caught the sides of the ladder and went swinging himself up hand over hand, while the ladder swayed backward and forward. He felt with his feet for the steps which he scarcely dared touch, they were so rotten and mouldering. Presently his head was over the side, and

he clambered into the great upper chamber. His matches were all gone, but it was light enough with the moonlight streaming through the broken-down roof and walls. In the dark he could have scarcely gone a step without falling through the floor to the abyss below.

In the farthest, dimmest corner he found her, cowering with her hands over her face.

"My God!" he said to her, "were you mad to endanger your life like this, or am I a wild beast, that you should escape me by such means?"

There was rage throbbing somewhere at the back of his head, but as yet he would not yield to it. When they were out of this infernal death-trap, as he called it, there would be time enough.

She did not answer him, but cowered lower against the wall.

"Come, child," he said gently, "you need fear no further annoyance from me. I am a gentleman, or used to be. Come; it will need all your courage to get out of this place alive! God knows how you ever got into it safely, or I either. Come!" he said again, in a stern voice of command.

She stood up, looking pale and awe-stricken.

He took her hand, noticing how deadly cold it was, and they crept cautiously, step by step, over the ruinous floor. Now and again their feet went half through the mouldering wood. Hilliard was wondering all the time how she would ever make the descent in the black pit below by the slippery and rotten ladder. She had come up with a greater fear driving her on, but it was another matter, cowed as she was, to trust herself to it as it swung in the pit of blackness below the trap-door. He wondered if he could carry her down. No, he decided: the ladder would never bear under the double weight, and he would be hampered by having only one hand to use in the descent.

They reached the trap-door, and as the girl caught sight of the way she must descend, she trembled violently. He put his arm round her with a rush of tenderness. "Courage, darling," he said; "I will take care of you,"—though at the moment he was sorely put to it as to how she was to make the descent. He looked round him helplessly. Suddenly, through the *débris* about the wall, he caught sight of a coil of rope. "Ah!" he said, with a deep sigh of satisfaction, drawing the girl back a safe distance from the

pit. "Now God grant it be not hopelessly rotten!" he murmured to himself, stooping and lifting the coil. He unwound it along the floor. The outside strands were rotten with exposure to the weather, but on the protected side there was an honest length of quite sound and clean rope. He cut off the rotten part with his knife, feeling ready to shout with delight. "Now, little Nora," he said cheerfully, as he came to her, "you shall teach me to thank your God for this exceeding mercy, when we get on *terra firma*. And now courage, child, and trust to me and this good rope."

He knotted it around her waist and then around his own. Then he helped her over the edge of the trap-door, holding her hands while she got her feet on to the rung of the ladder. Her face was white in the moonlight, and her eyes unnaturally wide with fear; but she obeyed him implicitly. While she held on to the lip of the door, he stretched himself on his face on the floor. He took her cold hands and let her down as far as his arms would reach.

"Now, darling," he said, "take tight hold of the sides and don't look down. Don't move till I tell you."

He could see the tense little figure below him on the swaying, cracking ladder, and he thanked God again for the rope.

He stood up and gathered the coils of it taut. "Now go, darling," he said, "and don't be afraid. Remember that you are quite safe. Sing out to me when you get down."

He felt the pull on the rope as she began to move, and he paid it out slowly, little by little. Once there was a sudden jerk, and he leant over with his heart in his mouth. He thought she had fallen off the ladder. She called up to him softly: "All right! it was only a missing rung, and I have found the next." After a pause she went on again, and presently her welcome call came through the dark to tell him she was safe.

He untied the rope from his waist, and, calling to her to stand clear, dropped it over. For him the descent was easy enough, and he made it light-heartedly, knowing she was safe. She watched him come, almost sliding from rung to rung, and made no sound, though her knees were trembling, and there was a roar like the sea in her ears. As his feet touched solid earth he caught joyfully at her hand.

"You brave little girl!" he said. "What pluck

you have! Why, not one woman out of a hundred but would have fainted or screamed at the thought of plunging into that abyss."

"This way!" she said, clinging to his hand. "At that side there is an uncovered well that goes deeper than anyone knows."

She had regained her self-possession. When they came out into safety again she looked proud and cold. A distant clock pealed seven as they left the mill yard behind them. She clasped her hands involuntarily.

"Oh," she said, "what will father and Aunt Sylvia be thinking? And you, too! Go, the Olivers must not know that you have been with me all this time."

A moment ago he had forgiven her for her wild freak and the fright she had given him. Now, at her icy voice, rage surged up anew in him. The reaction from fear often makes one cruel in resentment. He caught her in his arms and kissed her with violence.

"Indeed, madam," he said. "Do you think I will let you go so lightly after the fright you gave me? How dare you, how dare you terrify me like that? Why, my God," he said, with a hoarse sound like a sob, "I could kill you for the

fear you made me feel! You have yet to learn, my little Nora, what a brute the civilised man can be."

He almost crushed her in his embrace, kissing hardly all the time the lips that tried to escape him. Then he let her go as suddenly as he had caught her and strode away over the frosty ground.

Nora stood panting, trembling. She felt very cold, though her face was burning. She wondered how she could ever face her father and her Aunt Sylvia after such indignities being offered to her. She clenched her hand in the direction Hilliard had taken. "How dare you!" she sobbed. "You know you would never have dared behave so to anyone but me. You think I am not a lady like your cousins. You and your diamond bracelet!" she sobbed, with a childish intensity.

She waited a while till the appearance of composure came. Then she went into the house, and, perhaps to avoid scrutiny under the lamplight, crept up to her father's chair and softly rubbed her hair against his face. He woke up with a start.

"Why, where have you been, child?" he said,

leaning forward to look at the clock. "It's no hour for you to be out of your own home. I thought you had come in long ago." His voice was somewhat stern.

"I went to the convent," said Nora, still rubbing her curls to him, "and I met Mr. Hilliard and Jessie Oliver, and they came with me. And Mother St. Vincent was so kind to us, and they were so pleased, that we never noticed the time passing. We saw the Christmas tree and the schoolroom decked for the plays, and the poor people the children have dressed this Christmas, and we had such delightful coffee and rolls."

Nora talked on with the most placid fluency. From her timidity where blame was to be feared she had learnt to be a good actress. The events of the evening had shaken her, and she wanted above all things to get away where she could cry freely. Even now the hot gushes of tears were burning at the back of her eyes, but she held herself tense, and would not let them come.

"You didn't come home that dark road by yourself, acushla?" he asked, in a softer voice, while he took her hand and patted it. He waited eagerly for the answer.

"Oh, no, papa," she said measuredly. "It was

so very late when we left the convent, that Jessie had to go home at once. So we left her at her own gate, and Mr. Hilliard came home with me. We ran nearly all the way, but it was so late, he could not come in. He must have been very late for dinner."

Her father pulled her down fondly on his knee.

"He is a nice chap, that Mr. Hilliard," he said, stroking her curls, and watching her from between his narrowed eyelids.

"Very nice," said Nora, with calm equanimity. "The Olivers think very highly of him."

Fortunately for her, Miss Carew came into the room at this moment, and cut short the conversation.

"Darling child!" she said, lifting up her hands, "where *have* you been? I was growing quite alarmed about you, and was glad your father slept so long, because he would have been alarmed too, if he had wakened and had not found you."

Nora went over her glib little explanation, and then ran upstairs to take off her out-door things. When she came back Mary had brought the tea-tray, the barm-brack, and sweet loaf which were features of Christmas. Michael Halloran did

not like Christmas. It involved too many holidays for his workingmen.

"They're better at feasts than fasts," he used to say, and he was highly pleased when a holiday occurred on a Sunday. He would have readily agreed with some Englishmen, who put down saints' days as a leading cause of Irish poverty and lack of thrift.

After tea, a meal for which Nora had lately taken a distaste,—she would have liked late dinners, but dared not suggest them to the conservative old man,—she mixed her father's punch and filled his pipe, and volunteered to read him the market reports in the *Coolevara Chronicle*. This last was a great amiability, for she hated the dull reading. The old man watched her as she sat with her head in the lamplight, with a new intentness. He seemed to be thinking deeply, and by the way he made her go over the lists again, it was evident he had not been following her. Presently the heat of the fire and the punch made him sleepy, and he went off to bed. As he kissed his daughter, he said:

"My little girl has not told her old father what she'd like for a Christmas box. Eh?"

"Oh, papa!" said Nora; "you are always

giving me things. I seem to have everything I *could* want."

"Well, if there's anything up to ten pounds you've set your heart on, anything the Miss Olivers might have, and you haven't, let your old father know."

Mary had come in with his candle, and waited to speak.

"Miss Nora, honey," she said, when he had gone, "I've put a bit of fire in your room to make it cheerful. If you want anything, let me know before I go to bed."

Nora looked round at her aunt, who was deep in a novel of Miss Braddon's.

"Auntie, dear, you won't mind my leaving you?" she said. "I feel rather tired. Christmas is such a heavy day, don't you think?"

"Go, dear," assented her aunt. "I am very well amused with my book. And sleep well, sweetheart."

Nora went upstairs slowly, with a deep sense of relief. Her little room, with its chintz curtains and pink paper, was cheerful, a sparkling fire leaping in the grate. She took off her dress with a sense as if she were taking off fetters. Her heart had gone low now when she could,

unobserved, sit and review the things that had happened to her this Christmas Day. When she had got into her dressing-gown she sat by the table with her chin on her hands. The tears so long kept back would not come now, but ached somewhere unshed. She looked round the familiar room, where for the last two months she had brought her sweet, shameful, mad love-dream. In this room she had looked at it as safely as in her own heart. But now the sweetness seemed all gone out of it, and only the shamefulness remained. She could not think on Hilliard and his fierce kisses. "Ah," she said out loud, in a forlorn little voice, "I never thought I should be insulted, but I have been to-day." Then her pain became fiercer. "He should have remembered I was his cousin's friend, even if I behaved so badly, and let him make all that careless love to me, and I as good as married. Oh, oh!" she cried out, at the intolerableness of her own thoughts.

She covered her face with her hands for a few minutes. Then she took them down, and looked about her, her eyes smarting from the tight pressure upon them. She looked all round the room, and last at Jim's photograph

which was on the table before her. She noticed that the flower she had given him a week ago was brown and withered. She took up the photograph and looked hard at it. There was kindness in the honest eyes, strength in the firm mouth.

"My dear," she said, "why did you go away from me? Why didn't you stay and keep me straight? Without you I am nothing. Oh, if you had been here, I would not have been ashamed to look you in the face to-night!"

For the moment passion seemed abhorrent. She wanted the rest of a love ever the same, ever quiet and strong; the love which, Heaven forgive her! she had lately thought of as tame.

Her mood changed, and anger began to burn in her against Hilliard. She walked up and down quickly, and the colour came into her cheeks, and the light to her eyes. How dared he to have treated her so, she thought; made love to her, and not desired her for his wife; offered her his diamonds, who was the betrothed of a better man. Now, he would go away, no doubt, thinking he had left her hopelessly in love with him, dying for his sake, perhaps, like the girl in the poem he had read to her.

She suddenly stopped in her tempestuous walk. A wild thought had come to her of asking Jim to come back, to take the furlough he had rejected for the sake of his profession and ultimately for her sake. He had said that he left it with her and she—little fool that she had been!—had thought it a fine thing to bid him stay and win himself a higher place against the time he should leave India.

She acted with a sudden sense of exaltation. "If I wait till to-morrow, I may change my mind," she thought. Her desk was on the table by Jim's picture. She opened it, and, taking paper, wrote her letter.

"MY DEAR: I thought I should have been strong enough to do without you for all those blank, cold years to come! But I am not. I should die of it, I think. Perhaps if I could only see you I might be strong enough to let you go again. But come, come! I know you will come, and I shall be counting the hours till you are here."

When she had signed it nervously, and with her cheeks burning and hands trembling, she felt

that if she could only post it and it were beyond recall, the burden would have been rolled away that now was perceptibly pressing her heart down. There was just a chance that the faithful Lanty might be below, and for a sixpence he would be only too glad to take the letter to Coolevara. She ran down to the kitchen, softly passing the parlour door lest her aunt should hear her. When she opened the door there was Lanty himself "colloguein" with Mary by the fire. Nora felt for the moment such a sense of deliverance that she thought God must have willed it so. Mary was extracting items of gossip from the boy, and making sarcastic comments upon his news. There was not a child in the country too young for Mary to hold converse with. She found her fellow-creatures inexhaustibly interesting.

"Lanty, come here," said Nora, at the kitchen door. "I'll give you sixpence if you'll run to Coolevara and post this letter. Will you?"

"Wud a duck swim?" said Lanty shortly, taking the letter and sixpence, and his departure.

Mary yawned, stretching her arms above her head.

"Lanty was telling me, miss," she said, "how ould Joe Geraty an' the wife an' kid was dressed by the nuns for Christmas. He says Joe's pepperin' for the day after to-morrow till he pawns the duds. Och, God help them craturs o' nuns—it's too innocent they are! Let alone they makes the clothes themselves, and the throusers is all bags. Lanty says the men in the town 'ud give Joe a quare life if he appeared in them. The half-crowns apiece they gets is the best of the bargain, an' Joe's done a power of hugger-muggerin' for that."

Nora was used to Mary's cynical views of things, and especially of "voteens," so she only laughed.

"I'll come an' brush your hair, if you like, Miss Nora," Mary volunteered next, "an' give you hot milk wid an egg bet up in it when you're in bed."

"All right, Mary," said Nora, who had often had a sad heart lifted by hearing Mary's strange views of life.

So Mary brushed her curls and seemed to brush away the headache which she had carried all the evening, and regaled her with the history of a funeral in the County Wexford, and the

squabble which had resulted when Mary's Aunt Bridget insisted on standing on Joe Harris' box-trees.

So, after all the trouble, Nora fell asleep that night, smiling.

CHAPTER XI.

A RECKONING.

HILLIARD'S feeling on his way back to Cromartin was mainly rage—rage against himself and against the girl who had proved herself, after all, quite a match for him. He made fervid resolutions to put the sea between him and her. She had lowered him in his own eyes, for, half-unconsciously, he had been proud of himself all these years as Helen Illingworth's lover, who had kept troth long after her husband had found a more equal mate, and whom no woman had been able to tempt from his allegiance to the dead. He had resolved when Helen died that he would put no woman in her place. Why, he remembered taking that clay-cold hand and whispering, "You should have been my wife, and the mother of my children, and since you would not, no other woman shall take your place." And there, after all, was his troth broken, his honour in ruins, for the sake of a little peasant, whose beauty and fancied passion for himself had set

his imagination on fire. He had thought fine things of himself, and here he was as vulgarly a trifler as any young man about town. But he vowed as he strode along that that was all over and at least he should save out of the fire whatever shreds of will and manhood he could.

Dinner was quite over at Cromartin when he arrived, and Mrs. Oliver was in the drawing-room. Jessie came running downstairs to meet him as he turned the handle of the door and came into the hall.

"You *have* been a time," she said, "but we've kept things hot for you, and I'm going to preside. We would have waited, only father has a lot of business letters to put through to-night, and I persuaded mother not to keep forlorn state in the dining-room for you, so I've established her cosily in her arm-chair by the drawing-room fire, poor dear."

"Did you get into trouble about the convent, Jess?" asked Hilliard, taking off his coat.

"Not a bit of it," she replied; "I rattled it all out the minute we sat down to dinner. Mother made a kind of helpless appeal to father: 'Do you hear that Jessie has been visiting the convent, dear? I don't think I like her to go

there.' Father answered, as if his mind weren't on what she was saying: 'She is all right. They won't make a nun of her, and as long as they don't there's nothing to object to.' Mother said no more, but looked as if her thoughts were taken up with weightier things. We had a quiet dinner without you, St. Edmund. I can't help thinking the pater and mater have something on their minds, poor dears."

"What an imagination you have, Jess!" laughed Hilliard, as they went into the dining-room. "A pity you don't write novels and make money out of it."

"Maybe I do, for all you know, my fine cousin," replied Jessie. "But here is your soup, and you must be pretty hungry."

But St. Edmund made a poor meal. There is nothing like excitement for spoiling the appetite, and he felt too disturbed to enjoy his dinner as he usually did. He put the blame on Mother St. Vincent's delicious coffee and rolls.

Before the meal was finished one of the maids came in and said that Mr. Oliver would be glad if Mr. Hilliard would step into the study before he went upstairs. After she had gone, Jessie said playfully:

"I believe you've been in mischief, St. Edmund, and that you are the cause of the gloom which sits on my parents' brows."

To her amazement, Hilliard turned suddenly red. She was very contrite.

"Dear St. Edmund," she said, "you don't think it was anything but a jest, and the wildest one at that? Am I rude and stupid? Of course it is the wildest jest, for there is no one for whom father has a more trusting affection—yes, and mother and all of us."

"It's all right, Jess," answered Hilliard. "You are all always too good to me."

When dinner was over, he left her at the foot of the stairs and turned down the little corridor that led to Mr. Oliver's study. He found that gentleman writing away busily, but as he looked up from his desk as the door opened, Hilliard could not help noticing the worried look that usually open and jolly face bore. He pushed a chair for his visitor, and then handed him a box of cigars from the mantelshelf.

"You wanted to see me, Arthur?" said Hilliard, with the fluttering heart of a schoolboy who is called before the head master to receive

sentence of birching. He lit a cigar, and took one or two agitated pulls.

"I did, St. Edmund," answered Mr. Oliver solemnly. "I want to ask you if this is yours."

He held out a bit of twisted pink paper covered over with small round writing. Hilliard recognised it at the first glance. It was a note which Nora had managed to convey to him after one of their twenty times of saying farewell for ever. It was a compromising note, for it spoke of past meetings, and through the timid lines it was easy to read that it was a shy love-letter. Hilliard did not answer. He thrust the note into his pocket without looking closer at it.

"I thought it must be yours," said Mr. Oliver. "You will acquit us of reading a letter of yours intentionally. There was no beginning, and only the name 'Nora' at the end by which to identify it. My wife found it on the stairs this afternoon just after you had gone out. It was very fortunate that she, and not one of the servants, should have found it. I suppose 'Nora' is little Nora Halloran, my Jessie's friend, and the daughter of as proud and self-respecting a man as any to be found in the world—yes, and the promised wife of another!"

"Yes," answered Hilliard dejectedly, feeling the full reproach implied in the words, "the letter is from Miss Halloran to me."

"I should like to know how far this affair has gone, St. Edmund," said Mr. Oliver, looking and speaking very sternly.

Hilliard broke into a vexed laugh.

"For God's sake, don't look at me like that, Arthur! I've been a confounded fool, and behaved pretty badly, I know, but, hang it all, I'm not scoundrel enough for you to speak to me like that! There's been nothing more than a little clandestine love-making, which I drifted into innocently enough, and by a road of broken good resolutions."

"It seems to me pretty bad, St. Edmund," said Mr. Oliver. "I certainly had no worse suspicion of you and my little girl's friend. And that poor child! I thought better of you, my lad, than to suppose you would tempt into a clandestine love affair a lady you met as my guest."

Hilliard winced.

"What did you mean by it?" continued Mr. Oliver pitilessly. "You did not want to marry her."

"No," said Hilliard, "I never thought of marriage. I just drifted on from meeting to meeting. In cold blood I see how bad it was, but I was never in cold blood if I was within a quarter of a mile of her."

"Well, my boy," said Mr. Oliver, "it's no use piling it on. I didn't suppose you wanted to marry her. She would wither in your London drawing-rooms, poor little thing! and I doubt if she has the stuff in her to satisfy you, who loved Helen Illingworth. I think, my lad, you've behaved badly. I might put a strong qualifying adjective to it, if it were my way to swear. But it's no use rubbing it in. I never thought, St. Edmund, that I should have to ask you to leave my house. Now I do it with as much pain as if you were my own boy. But it is the only thing to be done. You must go to-morrow, St. Edmund, and give me your word to have no further communication with the girl."

"If you were any other man, Arthur, I should tell you to go to the devil. Hang it all, am I so bad?" said Hilliard, moodily gazing at the gray butt of his cigar. "I suppose it was too much to think that I had buried my youth and my manhood at twenty-three. Nature might have taken a

worse revenge than that involved in kissing a little girl who had awakened in me feelings I thought dead for ever."

"Don't excuse yourself, my lad," said Mr. Oliver coldly. "Any lady you met in this house was under my charge and should have been respected by you."

Hilliard looked up at him.

"You've been so extraordinarily straight yourself, Arthur, that you've no knowledge of what temptation is. If all the world was like you there'd be no justification for the doctrine of original sin. But you need say no more to me. God knows what you've said is punishment enough! I'll be off to-morrow morning at cock-crow. I suppose there is no train to-night?"

Mr. Oliver stood up and put his hand affectionately on the younger man's shoulder.

"No such hurry, St. Edmund," he said; "and don't take it as if I were kicking you out. Don't you see there's no other way for it, as the girl seems to have infatuated you? I know it must have been infatuation, for I believe you incapable of such things in, as you say, cold blood. I won't deny that it has shaken me, St. Edmund, but the proved love between you and me doesn't

go down before even such a shake. You will do as I tell you, my lad—go away and promise not to see or communicate with the girl any more?"

He looked at Hilliard's downcast face with a tender and anxious scrutiny.

"I suppose so, Arthur," replied the latter. "I hardly think she'll trouble me when the sea's between us, and I'm pretty sure I shan't trouble her."

"That's right!" said Mr. Oliver cheerily. "Come, don't look so miserable over it. Let's go up to the drawing-room now and have some music."

Hilliard shrunk back. "Must I go, Arthur?" he said. "I don't like to face Mrs. Oliver and your girls after this confounded business. By the bye," a fresh thought occurring to him, "you won't make Jessie drop the girl?"

"No," said Mr. Oliver; "she's only a child, poor little thing, and I hold you the blameworthy party. Don't be afraid of my wife. Trust Edith for almost unadulterated mercy in dealing with her fellow-creatures. The girls don't know, and won't know if you keep your parole. They'll be lamenting when they hear you're off to-morrow, but I'll make it easy for

you. Courage, St. Edmund! Why, my wife has by this time made a thousand excuses for you. In every young man she sees our own boy grown older, and she loves you, St. Edmund."

When they came into the drawing-room, Mr. Oliver had his arm round Hilliard's shoulder. Mrs. Oliver looked up hopefully; she had a glimmering idea that her favourite must be cleared, but her husband's first words disillusioned her.

"St. Edmund finds, Edith, that he must be off to-morrow."

The two girls broke out in protestation, but their father silenced them with an uplifted hand.

"It is absolutely necessary. Do you think a man and a landed proprietor is of no more account, when he slips out of his world for a time, than a pair of little idle hussies who make a great pretence of being busy?"

"Oh, but what shall we do without St. Edmund?" broke out a clamorous duet.

"And what about the Hunt Ball?" cried Jessie.

"And the meet at Tinorin Cover?" echoed May.

"And the skating?" said Jessie dolefully.

"St. Edmund promised to show us how they skate at St. Petersburg."

"There," said Mr. Oliver; "you're making your cousin feel melancholy. Be off with the pair of you and let him hear his favourite music and songs for to-night. Oh, by the way, what about the book of carols he gave you to learn?"

The two girls went to the piano, and soon their fresh young voices rang out in the old carols: "Good King Wenceslas" and "God Rest You, Merry Gentlemen."

Mrs. Oliver meanwhile had motioned Hilliard to sit by her. She saw he looked downcast, and her heart yearned over the culprit, for her way was to love the sinner while she hated the sin. As he sat there watching her while she listened to the Christmas songs, he felt himself within the circle of a divine, all-forgiving kindness. Mr. Oliver lay back in his arm-chair, dreamily listening, and tapping with his finger on the chair. It was hard for Hilliard to believe that he was really going forth to-morrow in a kind of disgrace. The Christmas peace, a veritable truce of God, seemed to hover over the house.

When Hilliard went to his room he found that it was snowing. The moon was misty with the

fine falling flakes, and the church clock in Coolevara, the same which he and Nora had heard that evening, struck with a muffled sound. His thoughts went to his fellow-culprit. He wondered how she was feeling, and how she would feel when she heard he was gone. He took out the unlucky diamond bracelet and flung it into his open trunk. Her reception of his offering had certainly made him feel uncommonly small. He was glad to think that she would hear in a day or two that he was gone, and would realise that she need not have been so haughty with him, after all. How would she feel about it? Perhaps she would cry, but soon she would begin to hate him when no message came, and after a time to despise him. That was not a pleasant thought. What a world of difference there was between their attitude to each other now, and the wild love-making of the last two months. Could they have believed when her head rested on his shoulder, and their lips met in the silent twilight, that so soon there would come such a cold severance between them? He wondered if he would miss her out of his life. He supposed he would, though London was full of pleasant houses and pleasant folk

waiting to receive him back into their midst. She had made him feel more in the last two months than he had in all the dreary years since Helen died. He was glad to know he was still a young man and could feel like his contemporaries, but it was a small set-off against Arthur's disappointment in him and his disappointment in himself. He wished he could have come out of it better.

This way and that way went his wavering thoughts before he fell asleep. He awoke in the morning to a snowy world. There was a long, indolent morning to be got through before the mail train left Coolevara at three. After breakfast he stood in the dining-room window overlooking the snowy spires of the town, and the long, smooth stretches of white velvet between, on which some sheep were disconsolately rooting for a mouthful of grass. He did not know what to do with himself. There was not time enough to begin anything, though there was too much time for doing nothing. The girls, after hovering about him uneasily for some time, had settled to their avocations. Mr. Oliver was interviewing some of the tenants in his study. Mrs. Oliver was closeted with the cook. Only Codger rubbed

insinuatingly against his leg, and suggested that it was a fine morning for a walk. The Pomeranian, who was wheezy, and took no outdoor exercise in winter, was no companion for an open-air-loving sportsman like Codger.

Hilliard looked down at the little yellow head.

"No, old chap," he said, "it's no go. You and I don't go for any more walks, Codger."

It was surprising how sad he felt as he said it.

Yesterday morning, if so be he had an unappropriated hour or two, he would have known well where to spend them, and where a face would flush and an eye brighten at his coming. He shook himself impatiently. No, he must not think of the girl any more, or if he did it must be as the little spitfire who had so furiously repulsed him, who had played that mad prank of putting her own life and his in danger. How she had terrified him! And how coolly she had taken it afterward, ordering him off about his business as haughtily as a duchess! He felt an agreeable wave of the rage which had warmed him last night as he strode home in the moonlight.

After lunch Mr. Oliver drove him to the station. Mrs. Oliver had pled piteously with her husband to keep him another day and not let

him turn out in the snow, but the worthy gentleman was obdurate. "I want him to feel," he said, "when he goes back to London and is perhaps tempted by the thought of the girl,—and mind, Edith, my dear, she's an uncommonly tempting morsel,—I want him to feel that he's tied up stringently, so there must be no undue softness in dealing with him; it's for his good, my dear."

So it came that when Hilliard asked Mr. Oliver, on their way to the station, whether he ought not to write at least to Miss Carew to explain that he had been called away too suddenly for a farewell visit, he was met with an emphatic "No."

"Let them hear no more of you," he said. "It is all you can do. If the little girl thinks it strange and bad of you, then she will forget you all the sooner."

"It might be, Arthur," said Hilliard drily, "that some men might not consider *that* a thing to be joyfully anticipated."

"Perhaps not," said Mr. Oliver, "and I didn't suggest it as a matter of joyful anticipation to you. But if it isn't pleasant you must swallow it. You wouldn't have her grieve for you! All the same, if I were young Hurley I'd come home for

her. He's put too hard a test on her. All those years of absence might well wear out a girl's love."

"If he cared for her he would come," said Hilliard. "There are always so many things that may happen in this world of change and mischance and death."

He looked gloomily over the white landscape, and Mr. Oliver conjectured he was thinking of Helen Illingworth.

"You mustn't generalise, my lad," he said. "I've no doubt young Hurley is soundly in love with his affianced wife. But there are some natures always beset by shadowy fears for those they love, and others, more confident, that never anticipate misfortunes. I expect the long absence in this case is as hard on the man as the woman. India's an unhomelike place at best."

The train was drawing up to the platform as they got into the station, so there was not much time for conversation. But Mr. Oliver pressed Hilliard's hand warmly as the train began to move. "Remember," he said, "that the old love between us can never be broken, my lad, and you are doing the right thing *now* in going away."

Hilliard answered with an affectionate hand-clasp, and the train sped away over the snow.

Certainly Cromartin was dull without him. After they had gone, Jessie mooned about aimlessly, while the more duty-bound May devoted herself to answering her Christmas letters. "I do wish you'd do something, Jess," May at last complained. "You're hindering me by walking round in that aimless fashion, taking up things and putting them down, as though there weren't so many things to be done that the day is too short to do the half of them in."

"You're always busy over nothing, May," Jessie retorted impudently. "Dear me!" she said; "it does unsettle one to have people going away. Here's Codger too feels it, old doggums."

Codger looked up at her and then out of the window, saying as plainly as dog could say it: "Do take me for a walk."

Jessie understood him and responded: "All right, old chap! I'll leave you in May's uncongenial company while I put on my hat."

The afternoon was bright and cold, and Jessie stepped out into the snow with a sensible exhilaration, while Codger ran here and there, flinging

the snow over his head and having a regular good time of it. After a brisk trot, Jessie called him to her. "Now where shall we go, Codger?" she asked. "Would you like to make an afternoon call on Rags?"

"Yes! yes!" barked Codger joyfully.

"All right, old fellow," said his mistress, "I take you at your word;" and she turned in the direction of the glen.

Nora was engaged in the engrossing feminine occupation of "tidying up" her possessions when she heard Jessie's knock. She had very little doubt that the visitor was Hilliard, and she lifted her head with angry scorn at his presumption in coming again. He would soon see that things were to be very different between them, and the sooner he knew it the better; so it was perhaps as well he had presumed to-day, after all.

She crept to her door, and listened while Mary opened the hall door. She heard Jessie's voice, and the scamper in the hall as Codger and Rags flew ecstatically into each other's arms. Then as the parlour door closed, she prepared to descend in a very stately way. She met Mary halfway. "Miss Jessie Oliver, miss——" she began, and then beat a hurried retreat.

Nora walked into the room with her head very high in the air. It was something of a drop for her to find only Jessie. She looked round the room as if expecting someone else. To her annoyance Jessie divined her thought.

"Oh, did you expect to see St. Edmund?" she said. "Why, he's gone, poor dear, and we're all in doleful dumps. That's why I've come to inflict myself on you, Noreen."

Nora felt rather sold. She did not say she had expected Mr. Hilliard, but only made some conventional remark about the disagreeableness of people going away. It flashed through her mind that all the fine withering scenes in which she was to have met him need not have been planned at all, since they were little likely to come off now. She listened to Jessie's praises of him in so *distraite* a manner that the latter rallied her on her absent-mindedness. They had drawn closer to the fire, and had settled down comfortably for a good chat.

"I believe something has happened, Noreen," said her friend, "for you look as if you were miles and miles away from everything I am saying. Is it anything about Jim?"

Nora broke into a sudden lovely flush that

would have distracted Hilliard if he could have seen it. She looked into the heart of the fire for a moment without replying.

"Yes," she said at last, "there is something about Jim. I've written and asked him to come back. I found that, after all, I couldn't face those years."

Jessie gave her a very hearty kiss.

"Why, you poor little thing!" she said; "I expect you've been suffering agonies of loneliness since you made the heroic resolve to bid him stick to his post. And to think I never guessed it!"

Nora withdrew herself gently from Jessie's embrace.

"Why, of course I was lonely," she said. "Wouldn't any girl be lonely under the circumstances?"

Jessie agreed heartily that any girl would.

"Keep it secret, please, Jess, till I hear that he is really coming," said Nora, as they parted.

"All right, old girl!" replied the cheerful Jessie. "Mum's the word!"

CHAPTER XII.

"I WILL COME AGAIN, MY DEAR."

NORA kept her letter secret from all except Jessie. She did not even tell Mrs. Hurley, though she had taken a fancy for spending a great part of her days with Jim's mother. Mrs. Hurley turned warmly to the girl's new affection for her. Her own daughters, in their other-worldliness, seemed at times too remote from her. Mary was gone, and Eily, as if that would hasten the hour of her flitting, had begun to make her trousseau—garments of the coarsest materials and plainest make, such as the brides of Christ use. Poor Mrs. Hurley, despite her heartfelt piety, almost broke her heart over that trousseau. No one but her husband and, perhaps, her confessor knew. Sometimes she had to run away from the parlour where Eily sat knitting rough stockings and fashioning undergarments of the most rigid kind, and would return, having recovered her self-control, with

a mist over her kind blue eyes and a pucker of pain about her placid mouth.

At night, when Eily had finished her office and retired to her pallet, the mother's fortitude sometimes gave way.

"Oh, John, John!" she would say; "I don't grudge them to God, but God knows it's bitter. It's hard to give the two of them, so it is. It's the clothes kills me. I often think how glad I would be if it was little linen and lace things Eily was making up for her marriage, or maybe finer things yet for a little baby."

"Whisht, whisht, achora," her husband would say fondly. "Sure it's the proud woman you ought to be, giving two nuns to God. And how often I have heard yourself saying that no one ever knew how an earthly marriage was going to turn out, but there could be only one way with the heavenly marriage."

In these circumstances it may be readily believed that Mrs. Hurley was very glad when Nora took a new turn of coming to her constantly. There had been a time when she hardly ever came, and it had been a grief to the kind, motherly woman, but she had hidden it in her own breast. Nora, who had grown very tender and

appealing, seemed to creep into a child's place in her heart. Her hidden sense of guilt made the girl more appealingly affectionate, and the poor woman, who had carried a hidden fret under the eagerness of her girls for the cloister, took Nora into her heart with a warm sense of her extreme humanness. After a time it became a relief to both of them when Eily would pack away her rough flannel and take her rapt young face and absorbed mind away to the compline at the convent, and leave these two alone in the twilight. Mrs. Hurley plucked up visibly under this new comfort, and began to anticipate more calmly the 25th of March, when Eily was to depart to her distant Convent of Mercy. That austere young person had no sweeter ambition than presently to be sent out on mission work to India or Africa. She talked over her desires with such cold-blooded pleasure, so to speak, that the mother's heart was half-vexed, half-proud, at the supernatural mind of her girl. John Hurley, meanwhile, was well pleased to come in and find his wife and prospective daughter-in-law, as he expressed it, "coshering each other," for he had learnt to dread Eily's leaving them more for his wife's sake than his own.

It was a bright spring-like day of early February when Nora's great news came. A south wind had melted last week's snow, except where it lay in patches under the hedgerows, and every little gully was shouting gaily. The snowdrops were out in the gardens, and the birds had begun their spring songs. It was very early in the day for a visit from Nora, and Mrs. Hurley, in the parlour, was making up her household accounts when Nora came rushing in.

"Guess my news!" she said, waving a letter in her hand. She had run nearly all the way from home, and her eyes were dancing, her cheeks flushed, and her quick breath coming and going through her parted lips. She brought the freshness and joy of the spring into the room with her.

Mrs. Hurley drew down her face and kissed it.

"Something about Jim, to be sure," she said. "Has he got promotion?"

"Better still, little mother," said the girl, leaning over from behind her. "He's coming home! He'll be here by Easter!"

Mrs. Hurley jumped up and took the girl in her arms.

"Now, how did you manage that, you little witch?" she said. "I thought you'd arranged

between you that he was to stay out there waiting for that weary promotion."

"I asked him to come, and he is coming," said Nora simply. She opened the letter more quietly and read bits of it to the delighted mother. One could read between the lines of it that Jim, strong as he was, was rejoiced at his recall.

"We were foolish, little mother," said Nora, "to have thought we could wait all that long time."

Preparations began so joyfully in the Hurley household to welcome home the exile that Eily suggested she might as well have taken herself off at once to her novitiate instead of postponing her departure till the 25th of March. Her mother looked at her with her heart in her eyes when she said it.

"Avourneen," she said, "don't you know it 'll be taking the heart out of me to part with you, even though my boy's coming home? Be content with us for a month longer. Your father and I have done all we could to make your home happy. Don't be in such a hurry to go out of it."

Nora, meanwhile, had told her aunt that Jim was coming home. At first the two rejoiced to-

gether. A little shadow fell over their joy when they thought of breaking the news to Michael Halloran. Both felt it would be no good news to him; and they had an uneasy suspicion that the reluctant consent, only given in view of the long separation, might be now repented of or even withdrawn. Nora began, with some misgivings, to put together her marriage outfit—things widely different from Eily Hurley's. Day by day little packets of delicate *lingerie* reached her from London or Dublin, for Nora was not one to make her own outfit. The packets, when delivered in her father's presence, she put by unopened, and he asked no questions. He was not accustomed to pry into his daughter's feminine concerns, suspicious as he was of the outside world, and when Nora had claimed ten pounds as her Christmas box, he had given it to her without question. He had asked the reason of the cessation of Mr. Hilliard's visits soon after they had ceased, and had made no comment when told he had left, but in his heart he had been deeply disappointed. He had dreamed some ambitious dreams for his little girl, woven of a fabric so unsubstantial as Hilliard's apparent liking for visiting the House by the Mill. Perhaps

it was as well for Jim's prospects that the disappointment had been sharp, but the old man kept that hidden in his own breast and no one suspected it.

All Nora's little packets were taken over for Mrs. Hurley's approval, and presently they made a goodly pile. Mrs. Hurley had a true woman's pleasure in the pretty cambric and lace things run through with coloured ribbon, all so much more exquisite than anything which had been dreamt of when she was a girl. Even the austere Eily was tempted to inspect and admire, though she returned to her own coarse stuffs with a renewed zest. Then Jessie Oliver came for an afternoon, and spent an hour sitting by the fire in Nora's room, while the contents of the big brown trunk were lifted out one by one and laid in her lap.

Nora could never say the exact time when her satisfaction began to fizzle out. Perhaps it was that evening when she and Jessie had a real good old chat, as the latter put it; and when Miss Sylvia thoughtfully sent them their tea upstairs, and Jessie sat in the basket-chair, while Nora, with all her pretty things strewn around her, sat on the rug, her hands clasped about her knees and her tea-cup by her side.

The conversation turned on Hilliard. Nora had hitherto kept Jessie from talking about him, but as the weeks went by and her own prospects became assured, her heat of anger against him seemed to evaporate. She even found a pleasure in talking about him this evening, and Jessie was well content to discourse on her beloved cousin, with an occasional syllable of encouragement from her friend. Jessie usually idealised, and Hilliard did not suffer at her hands. She chattered on about his lonely boyhood, the brilliant promise of his Oxford years, his chivalrous attachment to Mrs. Illingworth, his devotion to her memory; and, led on by a question or two from the listener, she described the beauty of his old house in Lincolnshire and its surrounding woods and pastures, and his London house as her father had described it with all its delicate evidences of taste and refinement and wealth spent with judgment.

"If St. Edmund never marries," said Jessie, "it will all go to Carrie's little boy; and unless he takes the name of Hilliard—which is never quite the same thing—the old name will die out."

"But he will marry!" said Nora, in a startled voice.

"I don't know," said Jessie, vaguely pleased at the interest she was exciting. "You see St. Edmund has a very faithful nature. Father says that his love for his mother, who was an invalid, was most touching, and the loss of her saddened his boyhood so much. And then he has mourned for Mrs. Illingworth as few husbands mourn for their wives. I am sure no woman has made his heart beat once in the years since she died."

Nora did not assent; she knew better. But after that interview her thoughts began to hover dangerously about the memory of those two months. Jessie had unsettled her mind about Hilliard again. He could not have been coldly trifling with her, after all, she came to think. She recalled the events of those two months, and, considering many things that had happened, she concluded at last that his feeling had been genuine at the time; he had not thought of asking her to marry him, but then their whole intercourse had been so fragmentary; she had not been a free woman, and at every meeting they had resolved to part. The thought of him recurred to her more and more despite her virtuous attempts to put him out of her mind.

And she was expecting a letter to tell her Jim had settled his day of sailing.

She grew fretful and morbid once more. She raged at herself for her instability of mood, but little by little a fear of Jim's return began to grow up within her. Then Jessie came one day with a letter in her pocket, and showed it to Nora when they were together. Jessie had a little pucker in her white forehead over the letter, the contents of which had troubled her.

"I want you to read it, Noreen, dear," she said. "I've been worried about it. I know you're as innocent as the babe unborn, but I can't help thinking you've singed poor St. Edmund's wings in your flame. I remember now that he used to like so much coming here, and that he always managed to have you included in our plans—not that *that* was difficult so far as I was concerned."

Nora turned red and pale as she took the letter. The sight of the strong, firm handwriting made her heart leap. He began with the gay tenderness which was always in his manner to Jessie. He asked for Codger, and the letter rattled on a page or two of light jesting. Then came this sentence:

"I want you to tell me something—anything you can—of your little friend, Miss Halloran. And, dear Jess, dear little comrade, don't say to anyone that I asked you."

"Now, I have a feeling," said Jessie, when Nora had come to that paragraph, "that the letter was written for the sake of asking just that question. If it were any other man, I shouldn't mind, any ordinary, flirtatious young man who was interested in your pretty face—but *St. Edmund!*" She paused to emphasise her amazement. "And you can see, the dear old fellow, that he doesn't pretend anything with me. He asks me honestly to tell him what he very much wants to know. Now, what do you think of it, Noreen?"

To her bewilderment Nora covered her face with her hands; and her shoulders began to shake convulsively with her sobs.

"You poor little thing!" said Jessie; "I didn't mean to accuse *you* of anything. You're not responsible for your beauty and 'the confoundedly taking way you have with you,' as once I heard a young gentleman remark."

But Nora wept on, and would not be com-

forted. When she had exhausted her tears she got up, apparently ashamed of herself, and bathed her eyes. Jessie followed her about with a mute appeal and eyes full of trouble. When Nora had recovered herself she clasped both her strong arms about her.

"Tell me, Noreen," she whispered, "are you happy? I shall be so miserable if I think you are not—but you surely are?"

"Happy!" said Nora; "I think any woman with a lover like mine coming home to her in a month should be happy."

"Indeed she should!" assented Jessie heartily.

Jessie went slowly back to Cromartin, deeply ruminating. That outbreak of Nora's troubled her, but there! Nora was such a creature of moods and whimsies that you never knew when you had her. Jessie tried to put the matter out of her mind, but somewhere at the back of her thoughts it troubled her. And Nora grew once again uncertain in her moods, and for many evenings Mrs. Hurley looked for her in vain. On such evenings the girl was fighting her battle. Again and again a face was in her thoughts, a passionate, finely-cut face, very unlike Jim Hurley's square-jawed honesty. A voice was at her ears,

a breath on her eyelids. How often she cried out, shuddering, as a saint of old to the tempter: "Oh, leave me! Why do you haunt me?" Yet the face remained, and the sensation of its closeness was ravishingly sweet to her senses. Nora began to have sleepless nights, and to come down in the morning with shadows under her eyes. And Jim Hurley was even then making his way across country to embark at Madras.

One afternoon Nora was sitting idly in her own room, "doing nothing but twiddling her thumbs," as Mary expressed it. In reality she was engaged in the struggle in which she was every day more beaten and depressed. She was beginning to dread her lover's return, which every day was coming nearer. She had pleaded neuralgia as an excuse for her low spirits, her heavy eyes, and evident languor, and had begged to be left alone. There was a knock at the door. "Oh, come in!" said Nora, with weary impatience.

It was Mary, bursting with some news or other. But then Mary was so amazingly interested in the most commonplace doings that Nora's curiosity was seldom roused. She looked her

weary protest at the sudden intrusion, but Mary was too excited to notice.

"Miss Nora, darlin'," she said, "your aunt has a visitor. An' I'd say by the cut of him he's a sayfarin' man—I mane to say gentleman. He walks with a wobble, the same as the foreign man Mary Geraghty married,—more betoken she's home, with a black eye, an' he took up wid another woman."

Mary paused for breath, and to see how her news was received. Nora was quite wakened up from her lethargy. She remembered her aunt's love-story.

"What else is he like, Mary?" she said eagerly. "Is he old or young?"

"Oh, a personable man," said Mary, "mixed middlin' as to age. I could swear I heard your aunt give a little screech out of her as she stood up an' saw him plain. An' if I'm not mistaken he addressed her by name. Maybe he's a blood-relation, miss?" suggested Mary, with keen curiosity.

"I don't know that we've any relative who is a sailor," said Nora, smiling faintly. "However, I dare say we'll know who the visitor is all in good time, Mary."

Nora waited for a long time, but no summons came from the parlour. Tea hour drew near, when her father would be coming in for his evening meal, and Mary, who had the tea-tray ready, began to make scurrying flights up and down stairs to take Nora's advice as to whether she "might make bould to go in"; for Mary was devoured with curiosity. Nora was curious herself, as she sat heaped up in her bedroom in a chilly little bunch, but she kept Mary in check till she thought it was really time to disturb the friends, whose conclave had been long and close.

She put on one of her prettiest frocks with an unconscious coquetry, and went slowly downstairs. At the door she paused, and coughed loudly, with her hand on the door-handle. Then she turned it and went in.

A bronzed, bearded, rather elderly man, evidently very much at home, was sitting in her father's chair by the fire. Her aunt was facing her as she entered, having just stood up; but what a change there was in her! The elderly, faded look had dropped away, and Sylvia Carew was flushed like a rose. Her eyes were moist, as with recent tears, her lips were parted in a dreamy smile; she looked surprisingly young

and eager and tender. She made a step or two forward, and drew Nora within the circle of the lamplight. "Oh, dear child, forgive me if I forgot about you. Oh, Nora, my ship has come home!"

The broad-shouldered man in the chair came out of his retirement. His head was iron-gray, and there was gray in his crisp beard, but his face had a boyish look; the look of a man who had kept his illusions.

He took Nora's hand in a great grip that almost made her cry out. Even while he spoke, his eyes wandered to Sylvia Carew's face.

"I've come home for my wife, Miss Nora," he said. "Sylvia's been telling me that she told you our story, a while ago."

"Oh, yes!" said Nora. "I thought it must be you when Mary told me of Aunt Sylvia's visitor. Oh, how very, very glad I am!"

"Of course you are," said the man, with a jolly heartiness, and standing on the hearth-rug he slipped his arm round Miss Carew's waist. "And I'm not going to wait, I can tell you, Miss Nora. I've waited nearly twenty long years, and though its only made her sweeter and prettier, it's a long, long slice out of a man's life."

He looked at her with the most tender admiration, and Nora felt a fierce little stab of something—was it envy?

Her aunt slid away from the embrace, and went quickly out of the room, smiling and blushing. He stood there straddling the hearth-rug, laughing and talking in the highest of spirits till she returned. She came back in a little while, transformed, her cap gone, and her soft abundant hair piled high on her head. She had on her gray silk dress, with a fichu of old yellow lace softening its rigid, elderly style. One of the late yellow roses that grew on the sheltered side of the house was caught in the lace. She rustled in with a shy, deprecating smile.

"This is a great day for us, Nora, dear," she said, with a look that asked for understanding and sympathy.

Nora had never realised how young-looking her aunt was for her years. Now, looking at her in the soft lamplight, she said to herself that no one would ever take her to be a day over thirty. Michael Halloran presently was heard in the hall, and Nora ran out to meet him. He knew his sister-in-law's old romance already. Nora caught at his sleeve.

"Come, dear," she said, "upstairs, and put on your very best coat before you go in to tea. There's the most wonderful visitor in all the world in that parlour."

"Who?" said the old man, looking at her sharply, and with his face lowering. He thought it was perhaps Jim Hurley, and the girl, divining his thoughts, shivered, as in a cold blast.

She answered him in a chilled little voice:

"It is Aunt Sylvia's sweetheart come back after all those long years. And though I have heard nothing yet, I think things are all right now."

Relief made Michael Halloran cheerful.

"That's good news," he said; "the best I've heard for many a long day. She'll be leaving us by ourselves, then, eh, little girl?"

"Oh, I suppose so," said Nora. "They seem very happy together."

Michael Halloran changed his coat, and, coming in dressed and ordered, greeted Richard Weston warmly. The old man showed at his best in his warm Irish hospitality. He would not hear of the returned traveller going back to the inn at Coolevara. Lanty was despatched at once to fetch Captain Weston's luggage. Sylvia Carew sat in a placid beatitude while Nora put finishing

touches to the tea-table, adding a cold fowl and a ham and some other substantial viands, to which Richard Weston did justice, despite his many rapturous glances at his sweetheart.

After tea, while the two men sat and smoked, the big spare room was prepared for the guest. Miss Carew insisted on helping in this delightful work, spreading herself the fine sheets which had been so long in her care, and patting the lavender-scented folds with her still beautiful hands. At last Nora caught her and thrust her into the big arm-chair by the fire.

"Now, come out of your trance, you dear bride that is to be," she said, "and tell us all about it. Afterward I'll let you give the room its finishing touches, but now I'm devoured by curiosity."

"Oh, Nora," said Miss Carew, "there's very little to tell. But it's only now he's a free man, though he never saw his wicked wife all those years. He came back at once. And he says we are to be married as soon as ever the law will allow us. He won't hear of waiting for anything. He has left the sea, and says we can have a house anywhere I like. I told him every place in the world was the same to me."

"So long as you had him, darling," said Nora, fondly smiling down at her.

"Yes, dear," assented her aunt, with a sigh of content.

After Michael Halloran had gone to bed, Nora discreetly retired.

"I want you to light a fire in my room, Mary," she said, "and then you can come and sit with me for a while."

She was afraid to be by herself, for her unhappiness was taking definite shape.

That night, after Mary had taken herself and her original mind off to slumber, Nora fell asleep, wetting her pillow with her tears. The sight of this real faithful love had made her sick with dismay for herself.

"Oh, Jim, Jim!" she sobbed against her pillow. "If only I could think I should look at you as Aunt Sylvia looks at her lover, and know you the one man in all the world for me! But I cannot, I cannot; and I am so ashamed and afraid, that I think I shall die when I meet your eyes."

But Sylvia Carew lay awake in the moonlight, thanking God over and over because her ship had come home after twenty years.

CHAPTER XIII.

"LOVE WILL FIND THE WAY."

MR. OLIVER was sorting the letters at the luncheon table at Cromartin.

"One, and a missionary magazine, for Mrs. Oliver; two for May; a book and a letter for Jessie; and all the bills for the pater."

"Isn't that mine, too?" said Jessie, stretching an eager hand for a large square envelope, very boldly addressed. "I see it's St. Edmund's writing, and I'm St. Edmund's correspondent. Besides, he owes me a letter, for I wrote him one with all the gossip a few days ago."

"Not so fast, Jess," said her father. "Read your own letter, and don't be greedy. This is addressed to Arthur Oliver, Esq."

There was a moment's silence while everyone turned to his or her correspondence. It was broken by a low whistle of dismay from the master of the house. He had put down his letters, and was looking very grave.

"I hope there is nothing wrong, Arthur," said Mrs. Oliver anxiously.

"No, my dear," he answered, "it was only something that surprised me."

He ate his breakfast in abstraction. When he had finished, he gathered up his letters in the same absent-minded manner and thrust them into his pocket.

"Edith, my dear," he said, "will you come into my study for a moment? I want a little chat with you."

Such an event was common enough to pass unnoticed, but the curiosity of the two girls was roused. Mrs. Oliver, with the anxious puckers in her face growing deeper, followed her husband. He closed the door of the study, and set a chair for her with his accustomed tender politeness. Then he faced her, with his back to the fire.

"My dear," he said, "I have had a letter from St. Edmund this morning which amazed and grieved me, as I am sure it will you."

He took the letters out of his pocket and selected one, which he handed to her.

"MY DEAR ARTHUR [it ran]: I have heard from Jessie that Miss Halloran's *fiancé* is about

to return, and this information has shown me that I was a fool to have left her when I did. I hope to be in Coolevara as soon as this reaches you, and to try my luck with the girl. Therefore I resign to you the parole under which you put me when you sent me away at Christmas. I won't ask you not to think too badly of me; you will think me an accursed scoundrel, but I can't help it. I only feel that nothing but herself can stand between me and herself, and if she feels for me a tithe of what I feel for her, it is fortunate that no stronger barrier than an engagement ring stands between us. All the same, I am sorry for what you will think of

"Your very unworthy

"ST. EDMUND HILLIARD."

Mrs. Oliver looked up from her reading with a horror-stricken face.

"Oh, Arthur!" she gasped, "what *is* to be done? Why, the unfortunate boy probably came by the very train that brought this."

"The first thing to be done," said her husband, "is to try to intercept him before he sees the girl. My old influence may work with him, though I doubt it from that letter."

"He won't come here, Arthur?"

"No," responded Mr. Oliver grimly, "he is not likely to do that. But unless his impatience has been too strong for us I may find him at the Westsea Arms. I'd better start at once. And of course you'll say nothing to the children."

"Oh, indeed no!" she answered.

A few minutes later Mr. Oliver passed the dining-room windows, too absorbed to notice that his daughters were kissing hands to him, and took the winding road down the hill to Coolevara, leaving his wife to parry the eager curiosity of the girls. Mrs. Oliver really felt quite as shocked as if she had come face to face with sin. Her own maiden emotions had been kept in such check, and she was even yet so virginally austere, that this undisciplined passion for another man's property repelled as much as it grieved her. Woman-like, her condemnation was even severer for the girl, and she found herself thanking Heaven mentally that her daughters could not inspire such feelings or understand them. In her time the thoughts of a girl toward her lover had been so timid and so maidenly.

Mr. Oliver reached the Westsea Arms, quite

warm after his quick walk in the keen air. Tim, the boots, met him at the door. Tim and Mr. Oliver were old friends.

"I was just sayin' to the chambermaid," began Tim, "that we'd have Mr. Oliver over in no time wanst he got word Mr. Hilliard was in the town. 'Don't be after taking his orders for a bed, woman, till you see,' says I. 'They'll be carryin' him off bag and baggage to Cromartin, so they will.'"

"Where is Mr. Hilliard?" asked Mr. Oliver, interrupting the flow of talk.

"'Deed then, I'm not sure he's not gone out. I know he was talkin' of goin' out as soon as he had his chop taken."

"Oh, I hope he isn't gone out!" said Mr. Oliver disappointedly.

"Just step into the drawing-room and I'll see. Divil a wan 'll come next or nigh you, for there's only commercials in the house, an' they don't favour the drawing-room. Wirra, God be wid the good ould times!"

Tim went off and left Mr. Oliver alone in the fine room that had seen many a hunt ball and assembly. The glories of Coolevara might be gone, but the stately room, with its finely fres-

coed ceiling, its carved mantel-piece and woodwork of wine-red mahogany, kept its old-world dignity. Mr. Oliver knew the aspect of the room, and noted none of these things as he walked the long expanse of polished floor, inwardly fuming.

He had come back to the great fire-place when he heard the door open, and, wheeling about, he saw St. Edmund coming up the long room. He stood watching his approach with a stern eye, but he noted at the same time that the other man's face was set just as hard.

"Well, St. Edmund," he said.

"Well, Arthur," the other replied.

They looked at each other as if measuring paces. Then the younger man leant forward, and impatiently kicked at a coal in the grate.

"I thought you would come, and I waited for you," he said.

"That was kind," responded Mr. Oliver drily.

"For God's sake, don't sneer, Arthur," broke out his cousin irritably. "Sneering won't mend matters between you and me!"

Mr. Oliver looked at him and felt his old affection stirring. "What do you mean to do, St. Edmund?" he asked more gently.

"I am going to ask her to choose between me and that other man, to-day, this afternoon, now, as soon as you leave me."

"If she says 'no'?"

"If she says 'no,'" echoed the other, with a hard laugh, "I shall——But she will not say 'no.' She will say 'yes.'"

"You are very confident, St. Edmund."

"I am. When I left her I was blind and a fool. I did not understand her. Now I understand her and myself, and we belong to each other. No people ever loved as she loves and I love."

"Yet she recalled her first lover."

"She was angry with me," said the other simply.

"Well, my lad," said Mr. Oliver, "I suppose it is no use trying to stop you?"

"None. If she were married and I loved her as I do I should still try to have her. It is the one kindness of Fate that things are no worse with her."

"You are talking wildly now, St. Edmund."

"It is true, Arthur, all the same. I would try to reach her though earth and hell stood between us. Heaven might frustrate me. I don't know

much about Heaven, but there is no barrier across which I would not try to come to her."

"I think what you say wicked, St. Edmund. Happily we are not often judged by our words."

"I beg your pardon, Arthur. I should have remembered your feelings about such matters. But it is true all the same. You cannot understand how a man like me feels."

"And the other man?"

"Let the other man look to himself!" said St. Edmund moodily.

Mr. Oliver sighed.

"I scarcely hope to turn you, St. Edmund. In the old days I could never have believed you the man to act like this. You must go your way, but I think your way is neither right nor honourable."

"It would be no honour to let her marry a man to whom she could never give the feeling she has given to me. You know nothing of it, Arthur. Why, my God, it makes me shudder to think that I might have come after she was married! I could not give up my happiness twice, Arthur."

"I see that I need say no more," Mr. Oliver said coldly. "I might waste my breath on a great many words ineffectually. But you will

understand that this makes things different between you and me."

"I understand," said the other, flushing darkly.

There was no pretence at a friendly parting between the two. Mr. Oliver, as he went away, said half sadly:

"The other man is on the sea by this. I should be sorry to have laid waste my neighbour's paradise as you are seeking to do, St. Edmund."

There was no answer, and he went out of the room very crestfallen. Tim noticed that he was in no mood for a chat, and let him pass with his kindly absent-minded good-day.

If he could have looked back at the man he had left he would have realised how very ineffectual had been his remonstrances. As the door closed behind him Hilliard stretched himself as one who is freed from a burden.

"*That* is over," he said, with a deep sigh of relief. "And now for my Sweet!"

He raced upstairs so jubilantly that Tim, listening, was obliged to reconsider his lately formed decision that there was something gone wrong between Mr. Hilliard and Mr. Oliver. He laid the case later on before Rose, the chambermaid.

"Women," he said, "though deficient in raisonin' powers, often jumps to an understandin' of a thing where a man may fail. Here's Mr. Hilliard and Mr. Oliver has always been as thick as two thieves, beggin' their pardons. An' Mr. Hilliard comes in on the day mail an' orders a chop an' his bed, an' hot fut on him comes Mr. Oliver and has a collogue wid him in the drawin'-room, all to their two selves. An' then Mr. Oliver, that's always so pleasant spoken, goes out lookin' as puzzled as you like, an' down-hearted. An' then my bucko here goes singin' up the stairs like a three-year ould. I'd like to know what you make out of it, Miss Rose."

But Rose, being puzzled, answered with a cheerful impertinence.

Hilliard presently swung out of the inn with "the sun in his face," as Tim afterward described it. The valley, when he had turned the road from Coolevara and began to descend into it, was full of the long afternoon sunshine and the singing of birds. Under the trees in the woods the primroses were coming out shyly, and in the old orchard of a deserted house tall daffodils were piercing their green sheaths. The branches of the trees had grown softly indefinite

for the legion of little buds coming upon them, and the breath of the spring was in the air, warm and caressing; a wood dove was calling in the distance, softly melancholy; and the valley, into which the east wind never breathed, felt the sap stirring in every vein. The spring was early in here, though the winter yet lingered on the hills overhead.

He went the familiar way with an immense happiness in his heart. A great part of the road he ran like any boy, and could have laughed and shouted aloud in his joy. The boyhood, too soon cut short in his case, had returned to him. The sealed fountains had begun to flow, the current to ripple and run. He had no misgiving at all. His one fear was lest he should not find his sweetheart alone.

Mary opened the door to him and beamed all over her broad face. "You're kindly welcome, sir," she said; "there's no one within but Miss Nora, but you'll be welcome as flowers in May to her."

"I hope so, Mary," he said. He rapidly transferred a coin to Mary's palm. "Don't tell her it is I. I want to surprise her," he said.

"I hope you'll cheer her, sir," said Mary, "for

she has the neuralgy. Divil such a young lady ever I saw! She's that mopey. You'd think her aunt and herself had changed places, for Miss Sylvy's young again."

She ran up to the door of Nora's room and rapped sharply. "A visitor for you, miss," and was gone before any questions could be asked. Nora got up wearily from the bed, where she had been lying in a dull stupor. Three months ago her heart would have leaped at the announcement, but what visitor now could stir her heavy pulses. Before she got so numb and sleepy she had been wondering if she could find strength to tell Jim when he came that she did not love him. The nearer his return came the more hopeless seemed to her the coil in which her feet were tangled. Oh, if she had never known that other man and the dangerous sweetness of his love-making, how glad and without misgiving she would have felt to-day, for with Jim her affection had been equable, had burned with a steady, pleasant light that neither waxed nor waned. How fond she could be of Jim, she said to herself, if she need not marry him. What a dear brother and friend he would make. Then Mary's knock at the door roused her to the light of day and the troubles

she must face. She got up in an impatient misery.

When she went to the glass to arrange her disordered curls she noticed how pinched and chilly she looked. Her cheeks had a wan, piteous look, and there were purple shadows under her eyes. No one had troubled about her. Miss Carew had been so absorbed in her lover—and for other people the neuralgia made sufficient excuse for pallor and heavy eyes.

She certainly looked very unlike a happy girl awaiting her lover as she went downstairs. She turned the handle slowly. Her visitor was sure to be one of those tiresome Coolevara folk, for if it were Jessie, dear Jessie, she would have come upstairs unannounced. She turned the handle and went in with that languid step. When she saw Hilliard she uttered just one happy little cry, and the roses came back to her cheeks in a flood tide; the next moment she was in his arms.

He had had time to notice her heavy head and languid step. "My darling, my sweetest, my little rose of the world, what has come to you? Have you been ill, my heart's delight?" he whispered between his kisses, raining on lips and eyes and throat.

"I have been sad," she whispered back, "but now you have come I shall never be sad any more."

It was just as he had said. Her passion for him was strong enough to overpower all the world besides.

They were a long time together before they came back to earthly things. At last he lifted her head from his breast and said: "When will you give yourself to me, my heaven? How soon, how soon? for I shall not go away without you."

She pushed back her disordered hair and looked at him. Then she uttered a small cry of dismay. "There is Jim," she said. "Oh, poor Jim, what shall I do when Jim comes home?"

"Poor devil!" said Hilliard magnanimously. "We have treated him pretty badly between us."

"I should not dare to meet him," she said, holding off his kisses. "He is so good, poor Jim! And Mrs. Hurley. What will they think? Oh, how can you care for so worthless a girl as I am?"

He caught at her fingers and drew her arms again round his neck.

"It is another reason for hurrying on our marriage, sweetheart," he whispered.

"But he will be here so soon," she said, anxious-eyed at the thought.

"Leave it to me, my heart," he said. "I must carry you off from it all, if we have to make a runaway match."

"Oh, not *that!*"

"Well, not if we can help it. How will your father take this, do you suppose?"

"I cannot say. He never cared for Jim, but he will think it bad of me all the same. Oh, how bad everyone will think me! Poor, poor Jim, and Mrs. Hurley, who thought so much of me, and Eily, and Jessie, and everyone!"

"Hush, my bird, my beauty! Isn't our love worth it?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" she murmured, sinking on his breast.

There was a step in the hall, and Nora sprang from his arms.

"It is papa! What will he say?" she cried, wild with dismay.

"Tell him I am here, sweetheart, and I will make things right with him. Leave us together for a while, and keep a strong heart."

She went out in the hall and met her father on the threshold. In a voice scarcely audible she

whispered: "Mr. Hilliard is here and wants to see you." Then she fled from him upstairs. The old man looked after her, and, with a broad light of satisfaction on his face, which he hastily repressed, he went into the room.

Hilliard met him as he advanced.

"Mr. Halloran," he said, "I have a very strange communication to make to you, and the greatest favour to ask of you that one man could ask of another. Your daughter and I love each other, and I want you to consent to our marriage."

The old man looked at him slily from under his long white eyelashes. He was not going to betray his satisfaction.

"I understood that my daughter had already chosen a lover in her own rank of life, sir," he said; "of her own faith and her own people."

"That was all a mistake," said Hilliard impatiently. "Why, she was a child when he went away! No promise at such an age could bind her. And as for her faith, she will keep her faith, which I shall reverence in her. And I shall cherish her as no woman was ever cherished before."

"I am for her happiness," said the old man, with genuine feeling. "I never wanted this Hurley marriage, but if I had seen her heart was in it, I'd have given in. If her heart is in you, sir, I consent, though it will be bitter to lose my only child."

"But you will not lose her," said Hilliard eagerly.

The old man waved the words away as idle ones. He was little likely at his age to make many journeys to England, and he felt that Nora would shun Coolevara in the future.

"I know what you would say, sir," he said, "but I shall not trouble you. I am a very old man, and I must not be taken into account."

"But you consent?" said Hilliard eagerly.

"Oh, yes, I consent," said the other. "I could not have hoped to be with her very long. You will want the marriage soon?"

"As soon as possible. We must be married before Dr. Hurley returns, and you will see the necessity of getting her away from the nine-days' wonder."

"Oh, aye; I see it!" assented the old fellow. "I'll take her to London myself, and wait till you can be married."

"You, Mr. Halloran?"

"Yes, I. No one else—not even yourself, young sir—could care as I do for her happiness. I'd rather my little girl could have been married without the talk and the wonder; but I'll shield her from it as well as a younger man could do. And afterward I'll trust you. May God punish you, if you fail me!"

"Amen!" said the other solemnly.

But, after all, the old man had a vague dissatisfaction because, in this case, his boasted guineas counted for little. He had made himself well acquainted with Hilliard's rent-roll, and it was the crumpled rose leaf in his royal bed of ambition fulfilled, that the dower of his daughter could count for little. He would like to have cast nobles for his girl, like the Beggar of Bethnal Green.

It was settled that they should go quietly, so that none should know till they were gone, and in their isolation in the glen this was easy enough. Nora was called down to her father and lover presently. Her father kissed her with a silence she was grateful for. Hilliard watched her in a quiet state of bliss that was full for the time. They had a long, quiet evening, for Miss Sylvia

had taken her captain to tea and a game of cards at the house of some friends in Coolevara. So they had plenty of time to make their arrangements. Hilliard was to leave next day and wait for them in Dublin, where they were to join him a day later for the journey to London. Hilliard was right when he said he understood Nora. He had no doubt of her passion for him, but he would not give her a quiet interval in which to fret. Before he left, they were a few minutes alone. He drew off Jim Hurley's ring, which Nora had forgotten to remove, and laid it on the mantel-shelf. Nora let him do it with a drooping head. Then he took out of his pocket a ring case, and, opening it, displayed a diamond and sapphire ring of great beauty.

"I brought it from Bond Street, my sweet," he said. "You see, I was very sure. I bought you a quite new one. There are plenty of heirloom rings in the family, and it would have been conventionally the correct thing to have given you one of those. But life is to be so new and sweet with us that I did not feel I could give you a dead woman's ring, sacred as it might be."

He put the ring on her finger and held it up

for her to admire. She kissed it with ardent passion. Then she caught sight of the little discarded ring.

"Oh, poor Jim! poor Jim! she said, and hid her face in her lover's breast.

CHAPTER XIV.

LOVE IS ENOUGH.

As may be imagined, there was much excite ment created by these events in Coolevara and its neighbourhood. When it had leaked out that Mr. Hilliard had gone off by the Dublin mail in the morning, and that Nora and her father had "slipped off" by the evening mail, and that Mr. Hilliard and the old farmer's heiress were to be married in London, there was much excited comment and a proportionate taking of sides. What "Half Rome" and "The Other Half Rome" said was as nothing compared to the rival factions in Coolevara. There were those who said that "ould Mick" had laid his plans cleverly to catch the gentleman for his daughter, and others again who asked what Jim Hurley had been about, leavin' the little girl to be picked up by the first man she tempted. Tim, the boots, received a good many treats for telling his story of the interview between Mr. Oliver and Mr. Hilliard, which grew in detail in the telling as a

snowball gathers snow in the rolling. The business pleasantly excited Tim. It reminded him of the good old days when abductions were everyday events; when a gentleman no sooner fell in love with a lady than, if the powers were not propitious, he had her behind him on the saddle and pelting away with her to Dublin to be married.

"'Twas meself got many a sovereign," said Tim, "at a change of horses; an' many a time no sooner was they gone than up 'ud pelt the ould man, makin' the sparks fly out o' the stones as if he were Ould Nick himself. An' wid the sovereign warm in my palm I'd point the wrong road: 'Twas that way they took, yer honour. Ride fast, yer honour, an' ye're sure to ketch up with them!' An' off he'd pelt, an' meself and the stable boys holdin' our sides wid the screeches we daren't let out of us."

Mary was a person who would have been in even greater request than Tim if she had condescended to meet the many approaches made to her. On Sunday morning many were the offers she received of company for a bit o' the way home; but Mary was not to be pumped. It was part of her queer code of honour to defend the

secrets of the family with whom she was living, for the time, whatever came after. She expressed her opinion pretty freely to Nora's friends.

"In my opinion, men's as like as two peas, an' divil a man in this world's worth waitin' for. The bird in the hand's my motto. An' them that's screechin' over Miss Nora for makin' her choice between two gentlemen, it's little choice they ever had; an' it's aisy to be strong when you're not tempted."

"Are you speakin' of constancy, ma'am?" Mary said, in an acidulated voice, to a sentimental little spinster who had expressed her indignation at Nora's want of faith. "Well, then, ma'am, I'd like to know who the divil *you* ever had to be constant to!"

Though the person the most aggrieved in the matter, Mrs. Hurley, after the first shock of the revelation, began to make tender excuses in her own heart for the girl who had made a warm place there. She had received a tear-blotted little note from the culprit herself, which was the first intimation of what had happened. John Hurley stormed. Even Eily came out of her aloofness to be amazedly contemptuous of the

heroine of such a scandal. Mrs. Hurley, though her heart bled for her boy and the sorrow he was coming home to, added nothing to the outcry against the girl which for a time raged in her usually tranquil house. But by the time John Hurley was hardening into silence, and they had come to consider how the news was to be broken to Jim on his arrival, Mrs. Hurley began to plead for the sinner.

"I'm thinking I wouldn't be too hard on her, John. It wasn't a deliberate falseness with her. It was just that she wanted the weeny bit of will to keep her straight, poor child! I often thought of her poor young mother, when she used to cuddle up beside me, with her winsome ways; poor Mary, who hadn't the power to go against them that gave her to an old man. I'm thinking our boy left her overlong for the strength that was in her."

John Hurley looked at her admiringly.

"'Tis yourself is the kind-hearted woman, asthoreen. But don't ask me to forgive that little creature yet; not while our boy's still thinking of her as his own."

"Jim would have been good to her," sighed Jim's mother, "and he'd have had the will and

the sense for two. God grant the man she's taken before him may be a wise choice!"

"Upon my word, Mary," said her husband, "I can't go all the way with you. I'm too sore over the treatment our boy's received, with Michael Halloran, the thundering old villain, conniving. And I think as bad of her coming here and getting round you with her soft ways. Why, it's not a month since she left off coming."

"She didn't know her mind, the creature," said Mrs. Hurley, who, poor woman, had really given up more sweet illusions than anyone guessed, and had resigned the pleasant, warm thoughts of Jim's marriage, and, by and bye, Jim's little baby, to comfort her for the lost babyhood of her two nuns.

The father and mother went off to break the news to him at Southampton. On the way John Hurley suggested a possibility which had been troubling his mind.

"Mary achora, I've been thinking likely as not the boy 'll turn back, and 'tis possible it might be the best thing for him. He won't care to return to the old place with this thing fresh in people's minds, and everyone gaping at him to see how he takes it. I'm thinking, honey, if he chooses

to go back to the hard work we won't try to persuade him against his will."

A great blankness of disappointment came over his wife's face. She looked out of the windows of the train at the grassy Warwickshire fields, already faintly golden with the promise of May, not seeing them. He took her hand and waited for an answer. After a time she spoke in a very low voice:

"Very well, John; I won't persuade him against his will."

But Jim Hurley, when he had heard that he was jilted, showed no sign of a desire to return to his post. In the first pain and trouble of breaking the news to him his father suggested that if that were his wish he need not fear opposition, but the young man held up his head proudly.

"No, father," he said; "I'll spend my leave with you and my mother. You'll want me all the more now Eily is gone. You needn't fear that I'll think overmuch or overlong of another man's wife. It is only a question of breaking myself of a habit."

And whatever wound Jim Hurley had received he hid it from all eyes. He faced Coolevara un-

dauntedly, and the most ill-natured could not point with amusement at the dark, square-shouldered fellow who held his head so high as he walked up the church at ten o'clock mass on Low Sunday. When he came in there was a flutter of excitement, but there was nothing revealed by that strong profile, and the sleek, cropped head bent low above his prayer-book. After mass he escorted his mother from her seat with a tender carefulness, and waited with her outside the door while she held court for her gossips. He had allayed her fears that his heart was broken, and she was able to display him almost as proudly to the old neighbours who had known him from the cradle, as if there was not that galling thing pushed out of sight in his consciousness. No one guessed what those days cost Jim Hurley, and how in the quietness of the night he raged and suffered as the primitive man in the civilised creature will when his mate has been stolen from him. He carried no traces of his struggles, except in a grimmer determination about his strong mouth and a weary look he sometimes allowed upon his face, when his mother's tender eyes were not watching him.

The old friends began to rally round him. Nora's aunt wrote a very appealing note to Mrs. Hurley:

"I can't think Jim will want to hear of me or mine [she said]; but I feel bitterly how he's been treated, for I love him as if he were my own son."

If anyone could have seen Miss Sylvia as she wrote at a little Indian desk, the long ago gift of the lover so miraculously restored to her, they would have noticed that she blushed and sighed as she read over her own impulsive words. If she and Richard could have married in that sweet past she might have had a son in young manhood by this time. But that was all over, and they could only look forward to going down to the grave, hand in hand, a pair of old lovers. The sweetness of long ago was the sweetness of the spring, the late sweetness the sweetness of autumn, yet she was devoutly thankful, and bloomed in her restored happiness like a pale rose that takes shelter under the leaves of October.

Mrs. Hurley answered her at once:

"Jim would like dearly to see you. Come and bring Captain Weston. You will find no difference in any of us to you."

So one evening or two later, Miss Carew and her captain arrived at the Hurleys'—Miss Sylvia with a fluttering heart. Her fears, however, were quite allayed by the warmth of her reception. Mrs. Hurley took her into a warm embrace, and Jim Hurley, coming forward to meet her, took up her slender mittened fingers and kissed them with a tender gallantry.

Afterward, when she was taking off her bonnet upstairs, Mrs. Hurley gladdened her timorous heart. She held Miss Sylvia's slender gray-clad figure away from her and looked at her critically.

"Upon my word, Sylvia Carew," she said. "you're growing a younger and prettier woman every day. I'm not surprised at the way that man worries after you. You're a sight prettier than long ago, when all those young ones pushed you into a corner. And you've kept your figure: not a pinched, scrawny figure unbecoming a woman of your age, but a handsome, personable figure."

Miss Sylvia blushed with delight, and then murmured apologetically:

"I feel so young, Mary; if it weren't for the quietness I'd say I felt as young as the youngest. You see my happiness has come to me late and my heart has kept young waiting for it."

Another visitor of Jim Hurley's was Mr. Oliver. He and John Hurley had met at a fair and travelled home together. Mr. Oliver had asked for the other's companionship. Soon after the mare had set out at a swinging pace on the road homeward he came out with what was on his mind.

"I'd like that boy of yours to understand the grief I felt about that matter, and how the mischief was wrought without my knowing till it was past my power to undo."

"The lad knows it, Mr. Oliver, without telling," said John Hurley heartily. "He knows, and we know, that you took the business sorely to heart. You're not the man to have hand, act, or part in injury to a neighbour or a neighbour's child."

"Thank you," said the other simply. "I've been thinking of looking in to see your boy one of these days, but hesitated lest I should not be

welcome. I hear he is a lad for any father to be proud of."

"He is *that!*" said John Hurley, with gratified pride.

A few days later Mr. Oliver called in one morning, and fraternised easily with Jim Hurley. There was no word of *rapprochement* between the two men. Each remembered as their hands met — the one that his kin had brought sorrow to this capable-looking young man, the other that the ruddy-cheeked, white-haired man facing him was of the blood of him who had stolen away his promised wife, but neither faltered in cordiality. In a surprisingly short time they were on the most easy footing. Mr. Oliver sat in the big chair opposite Mrs. Hurley, who was knitting and listening with placid, motherly pride to the conversation in which her son took a prominent part. That young man was perched on the table swinging his legs easily, and, as his face lit up in his eagerness on the theories he was expounding to an intelligent and interested listener, no one could have imagined that he was a man but lately jilted. Jim Hurley had a strong hold on the things of life, and no matter, intimately concerning himself,

could turn him aside from the truth he saw ahead, and the work he believed to be awaiting his hand.

Michael Halloran did not trouble himself greatly about what anyone might be thinking of him. He came back after Nora's marriage as grimly as he had gone, and kept his pride and satisfaction in his own heart. His surly bearing rather ranged people against him and on the side of the Hurleys. If he was less popular, he scarcely noticed. He had never gone in for popularity, but had strode over the way to his wealth not caring greatly if he at times obliterated a neighbour's landmark. Nothing had greatly concerned him since his wife's death, since the sickening disillusionment he had had when he realised that she had died of her marriage with him, except his little girl. And now she was safe, set on high above what envy or malice could do; she was the equal of any of the proud country folk who looked on themselves as of superior clay to that of which his like was fashioned. He used to have ambitious dreams of what he would have done if he had had a son instead of a daughter; but his little girl had gratified his ambition as it was scarce likely any boy

would have done. In his own heart he said his *Nunc Dimittis.* He was satisfied that the child should be out of his reach: he had no thought of making those frequent visits to London, which his daughter hoped for and his son-in-law urged. Though he was so strong, he was very old, and he felt convinced that he would go suddenly, and not decay slowly like other men. Once he had set his house in order, he cared little now how soon the summons might come.

To his sister-in-law he offered no information. He had a feeling of coldness toward her because he guessed, by her silence, at the disapproval she was too gentle to express. He asked her one day suddenly when her marriage would take place. She hesitated a moment, and then stammered that she did not like to leave him alone. He laughed shortly.

"You've kept that man waiting long enough. Don't keep him any longer for an old log like me. Mary will look after me for the time that's left, and you'll be in the neighbourhood, I suppose."

He said as much to Richard Weston, who, indeed, had been chafing over the delay. Richard had found a cottage for his bride near Cahirmore,

where his boyhood had been spent. At Cahirmore the river from Coolevara widens into the sea, and from the cottage a view of harbour and bay and lighthouse spread delightfully before the eye. Captain Weston was rich enough to retire from the merchant service and set up his little household gods—of whom Neptune must have been one—on the sea-strand.

But all this time Nora was heeding little what that far-away, half-forgotten world of Coolevara was thinking or saying. She was living in paradise—the paradise vouchsafed on earth to happy lovers. In those days her conscience smote her not at all: her world was in her husband and the hidden rose-garden in which they were spending the early days of their married life. That was a miraculous spring—a spring in which the golden summer set in a flood-tide in mid-April, and bloomed to the very threshold of the winter. Unaccustomed folk sweltered and panted in the tropical glory, but the new Mrs. Hilliard bloomed in it like a little scarlet flower long exiled from its native air.

Hilliard had postponed taking his wife abroad till they had grown used to their happiness. He hated to think of hotels and steamboats and

trains for the scenes of their early love dream. He had taken this cottage in a leafy country lane for the summer, had furnished it daintily, and installed as sole domestic an old servant, who had loved him from his cradle. Mrs. Summers was proud of the trust reposed in her by her master, and perfectly understood that he could bear no other servant about him during his honeymoon. She was an admirable cook, and, with the aid of a village girl who came in daily to assist her, the little *ménage* went smoothly and daintily.

No one knew where Hilliard had taken his bride. His letters went to his club, and were re-addressed, but even at his own stately home, though everything was swept and garnished in preparation for the new mistress, they never knew when the master would bring her.

In the garden of the cottage all the fruit trees blossomed a month before their time in rose and silver. They stood up fairily fine the night that bride and bridegroom came home. "See, my queen," said Hilliard, with a boy's impassioned ardour, "your bridal flowers. May has flung them to April in honour of our marriage."

That is a rich, silent country, hidden in belts of woodland. By day there was scarcely a sound,

save the multitudinous noises of the country, the lowing of cattle, the bark of a distant dog, the moaning of cushat doves, the songs of birds, and the hum of insects. The mornings were wonderful, with the first thrush singing in the dark hours before dawn his miraculous song of love and wedding. And then one soft, piercing whistle after another to answer him, and lo! suddenly, the springing of the day out of the east and the full choir of the birds. Every tall tree was a world of them, and a nest for every gold-green leaf, and all the world in love and in flower.

They did not wander far from their cottage garden, which lay golden all day and smoked at evening under the mists of heat. Wallflowers and stocks heavily scented the air, and after a week or so, the hawthorn was out, and all the leafy country fumed like a censer. They had their breakfast under the shade of spreading trees in the garden, and squirrels swung overhead, and rabbits peeped from under big rhubarb leaves and then scurried away with a flash of white fur. For long no gardener had struggled there against the encroaching steps of the sweet, bountiful Nature.

Nora came to her garden breakfastsin wonderful, cool garments of lawn and linen, in which she

looked so adorable that her husband could not eat for gazing at her. Her changes of apparel were a constant delight to him.

"Wait, my beauty," he would say, "till we get to Paris, and you shall have your fill there of your pretty vanities."

But neither was in a hurry to get to Paris, or to end this sweet magical time. All day they wandered, hand in hand, through the gardens, and by the pond where there was one white swan, or sat where the wide trees made them a green-house. Under the shade of such bounteous beech and elm as Nora had not known in Ireland, she sat through golden hours in such a green light as there might be in the heart of the sea. Her husband lay in the grass at her feet and read poetry to her, or lapsed into silence, with his head against her knee, while her fingers crept through his hair.

Then the nights of full moon. There had been a faint sickle the night they came home, driving through leafy lanes while the west sky was yet dimly green and orange. Nora could never forget that drive, though it was shadowy in her memory as if she had but dreamt it, or it had happened in another life—the drive through

the night shadows and the silver mists, with all the world drenched in dew and perfume and earth a Garden of Eden. When Mrs. Summers, at the threshold of the cottage garden, addressed her first by her married name she seemed to awaken from that dream to a reality, if possible, more exquisite. Her heart leaped as she realised her wifehood; and sickness, and death, and pain, and remorse seemed as far away as from that first man and woman before the snake had entered into their paradise. Certainly, what Coolevara said mattered little to Nora Hilliard, and even her wronged lover had no place in her thoughts.

There was a night when a full moon sailed over their garden. They could see far away the river with its silver mists. Now and again came, through the silence, the harsh whirring cry of the corncrake—the voice of the summer. He had come from Egypt with the spring to woo and marry, and build his house between aisles of dog daisies and brown meadow grass. The air was sweeter than honey, and the last bird had sung his latest song and was asleep till the dawn. Through the open window there was a pleasant glimpse of a lamplit room, but the two lovers lingered out of doors.

Hilliard knelt on the ground, with one arm around his wife's slender waist. He looked with passion at her face, glimmering in the moonlight.

"My dearest," he sighed, "how lovely you are! And after all my desert life, how exquisitely God has blessed me in giving me you!"

He knelt up and took her face between his hands.

"My damask rose, kiss me," he said, "kiss me!"

She yielded herself to his kisses, sighing with rapture. Then they were silent for a while, leaning to each other.

"Oh, what a heavenly night," she sighed again, "and how glorious the moon is! Do you smell the roses, darling? There, on that bush, they are all opening."

"I smell the perfume of your hair," he said, with his face against her cheek.

"Oh, what is that?" she said, as in the high moonlight a bird began to sing; thrilling, penetrating; a very wonder of yearning and passion. It seemed to her like the disembodied voice of her own heart.

"It is the nightingale, my sweet," he answered. "Listen, for soon the woods will be full of the

nightingale's song. He is the bird of love, you know."

Earth has only one paradise, and happy are they who enter at its gates. And within its garden spaces life blooms as a rose of many leaves. When God spake His sentence on the first man and woman He turned not away His face so as to forbid them love. There was never a work of His hands in the garden of life bloomed like that. But when they passed out weeping before the fiery sword they did not realise that they bore that with them into the desert which, for a season, should make the desert blossom like a rose.

CHAPTER XV.

"SHALL I WASTING IN DESPAIR.''

SYLVIA CAREW was married one June morning by the old friend who had promised to bless her marriage twenty years ago. Her lover knelt with her at the altar without any division of heart or faith between them; and, if less ardent, their joy was scarcely less sweet than that of the young lovers who had taken their fate in their hands two months earlier. And Nora was scarcely a sweeter bride than the elder woman, in her delicate, half-faded beauty. Coolevara Chapel was thronged to see this romantic marriage, though it took place after early mass, and Father Phelan was heard to twit many fair members of his congregation afterward upon their new-found devotion. There was no doubt Miss Carew's marriage was a popular one, and a good many maids and matrons shed tears over the late union of those two faithful hearts.

Miss Carew had braced herself up to write to her niece a good while before this. Indeed, her

gentle indignation on Jim's behalf had never made her quite hard where one of the culprits was concerned. She wrote a letter, tenderly thought over, so that nothing should seem like a reproach. To express disapproval of a marriage after it was made would have been abhorrent to her, and she was very careful to conceal her still smouldering indignation against Nora's husband. She prayed night and morning that he might take care of her, and that there might never be any shadow on their love. Nora, in reply to her letter, had written her one that brought tears to her eyes, it was so full of her new-found happiness and of love and praise for her husband. Miss Sylvia had a tenderly romantic heart, that was quick to sympathise with all true lovers. She longed now that there might have been no wrong to another in this priceless love her little Nora had found.

She rejoiced more heartily than anyone, except perhaps his mother, that Jim Hurley wore his willow so bravely. He seemed to have brought a certain amount of new life into Coolevara. Coolevara is not noted for eligible young men, or, indeed, ineligible. The bachelors drift off to Dublin or Cork, and there is a legend that an

imported young gentleman had once to share his attentions between twenty young women at a dance, where he was the sole male. So Nora Halloran's discarded swain made a little flutter in the hearts of the girls, and his presence was the occasion of many a little dance and picnic which else had not been thought of.

It was part of the young fellow's simplicity of character that he never felt himself too fine for those good people he was brought up among. He was genuinely ready to enjoy himself with the pretty girls and chat with the elders, even if they had no glimpse into the world of thought in which he was at home. His apparent pleasure in the chatter of Kates and Marys often set his poor mother's heart beating with hope that he would marry and settle down at home. But all unknown to her, her son's ambitions were soaring far beyond Coolevara, and he was already in touch with a world which Coolevara only hears of through the newspapers. Old men high in his profession had taken note of some of his theories, and his articles in a high-class medical journal were coming to be read and discussed with attention and respect. During this holiday time he had not relinquished his work.

He read and wrote a good deal, and found much consolation in his studies. Further, he occasionally took a case for Dr. Carmody, the dispensary doctor, and gave that hardworked official a little respite. He was in love with his profession, and would have been well content, at any time, to sacrifice a night's sleep in order to give a patient a little relief. It was to be feared that if Jim set up against Dr. Carmody, the latter gentleman would have had small chance of beating his young rival out of the field. The women especially liked his straight, confident manner and the direct gaze of his eyes, which seemed to keep nothing back from them. Jim thoroughly abhorred the small professional manner which, with a great assumption of mystery and profundity, scares nervous patients half out of their wits.

Still Jim Hurley would have been rather starved for intellectual society if it were not for the intimacy that by degrees sprang up between him and the Olivers. Mr. Oliver's visit had ended with a cordial invitation to lunch, which the young man could not refuse without ungraciousness. He went, and, rather to his amazement, enjoyed himself uncommonly. He liked Mrs. Oliver greatly, and, once he had got over

her slight consternation at having yet another Papist received on friendly terms by her family, her great kindness asserted itself, and her manner to her guest was almost caressing in its kindness, for the thought of the injury done him by one of their kin still lay heavily at her heart.

He admired both girls, and appreciated their thorough air of breeding, but the unconventional Jessie interested him the most. Her views were so fresh and original, and she was so keenly alert about intellectual matters, that he felt her a comrade at once, and found himself talking to her as he would to a brilliant boy. Between whiles he was greatly amused at the amazement her social departures caused to her mother and sister, and the scarcely concealed pride and pleasure of her father in her. He used to think in those early days that it was a pity she was not born a boy, she was so frank and breezy and simple. Yet he liked her feminine ways, too; the musical tones of her voice, her bright eyes, and ruffled bronze hair, and the clear, fresh look she carried in her serge frock and spotless linen collars and cuffs. She was so very different from the girl who had wounded and cast him off that he could look at her with pleasure, untouched by the pain of

memory. A softer woman in laces and velvets, with faint perfumes about her and little coaxing ways, might have recalled that other too sharply. But here was a girl at the other end of the compass from Nora, although quite womanly enough to appeal more to a man than the pleasantest lad could.

He often wondered how long Jessie would bear the sweet, narrow ways of her home. Her character had been developing rapidly of late, and she seemed to chafe, though with never-failing good-humour, at the constant restraints put upon her by her mother. Once she remonstrated jocularly in Jim's presence, when her mother uttered a horrified exclamation at some of her heresies.

"Sweet mother," she said; "father says just as revolutionary things every day, and yet you and May never mind."

"Don't be implicating me in your sins, Jess," said her father comically.

"Your father is always right, Jessie," said Mrs. Oliver, with her little dignified air of rebuke, "but it doesn't follow that a little girl like you, with no experience, should share his views."

"What in the captain 's but a choleric word——"

whispered Jessie to her next neighbour, who happened to be Jim Hurley.

After that visit of his Jessie brought up again her request, which her mother had already refused many times, for permission to write to Nora. In her first shock, at what she took to be the girl's unmaidenly duplicity, Mrs. Oliver had forbidden further correspondence between Jessie and her friend. Now again, Jessie, who had learnt the virtue of persistency, re-opened the question.

"Dear little mother," she said, "when are you going to give me leave to write to Nora? You see she is a sort of a cousin now, and though she did behave rather badly I don't like to seem so poor a friend as to be willing to give her up."

"I thought we had settled that matter, Jessie," said her mother, looking up from the letter she was writing.

"And why should you *wish* to write to her, Jessie," said May, intervening; "after her underhand and unladylike conduct, I can't imagine."

"You two dear people," said Jessie, with an air of desperation, "you both want to pour the whole world into your special moulds. And as for you, May,—I won't include you, mother dear,

lest you think it disrespect,—you are like a gosling in a rut. Your rut is your world."

"Jessie!" said Mrs. Oliver, greatly scandalised. "Your sister is quite right, and it might be as well, Jessie, if you were as content to remain within the safety of bounds."

"Yes, dear mother," answered Jessie humbly, "for then I should shock you less. I fear I shall be always shocking you, for I can't alter my nature."

"Dear child!" said her mother, with renewed tenderness, while May spoke out of her corner:

"You are a great deal better, brighter, and braver than I am, Jess, but the rut is at least safe."

"Well, mother dear," sighed Jessie, "you can't go on ignoring Nora and St. Edmund for ever. You know you're fond of St. Edmund. I think myself they couldn't help it. I know Nora tried to be true to her troth, but I don't see myself anything but the most conventional virtue in keeping the mere letter of your word when your heart has already broken the spirit of it."

She gave up the effort at that moment, resolving to renew it as soon as possible.

She, too, found Jim Hurley's society a great

boon. There was little society in Coolevara, except that of old ladies, all of intensely conservative views and very low church in religion, and a few people who had not been estranged by Mr. Oliver's friendliness with the tenants, but who lived at long distances away. Jessie met them at the meets or the hunt ball, and sometimes there was an interchange of civilities, a luncheon, or a dinner party, or in summer a tennis party, with a lamentable absence of the male sex. But in this wider circle, too, the thought was attenuated, the interests of the most parochial. Jessie enjoyed Jim Hurley's talk even more than she had enjoyed St. Edmund's, for the latter had had no enthusiasm about his subjects, while the young doctor was intensely eager in his reserved way.

There was a day when the two met and walked together, and Jessie confessed to the young man's sympathetic ears her desire for a wider sphere of life than any she was likely to find at Cromartin.

"Only for the mother I would do something very revolutionary," she said. "I would go off and study medicine and make a career for myself. Father would help me, for father is very broad-minded, but mother would break her heart. I often think May and I will live here to become

two snuffy old maids. I've thought of getting round mother by finding a vocation to become medical missionary to the Zenanas of India. But I don't think distributing tracts to the poor things would be much in my line."

She laughed out, showing a line of little white teeth. Jim Hurley laughed too, half with pleasure, for she looked bright and sweet in her summer gown of pink cambric, which suited her brown face.

"You don't look much like a snuffy old maid, at all events, Miss Jessie," he said.

After that their friendship grew and throve. No element of consciousness crept into it, and Jim Hurley came to feel for the girl who talked her frank confidences to him much the same grave, elder affection he might have had for a charming boy. The Olivers looked on and were quite satisfied with this open friendship. Mrs. Hurley noticed that her boy was fond of going to Cromartin, and felt a misgiving in her heart lest there should be fresh trouble in store for him. Jessie Oliver had been to see her once or twice with her father, and Mrs. Hurley had decided that she was good and very pleasant. But she would not have liked for her boy a marriage with one

alien to him in creed and traditions. She did not herself know anything about friendships between young men and women, yet watching her boy's unconscious air and cheerful manner she hoped for the best, hoped that presently he would be able to go back to his work with no sharper pang at parting than he would feel in leaving her and his father. Away from this fear she had reason to be grateful for her son's friendship for the Olivers, for she had begun to discern the fact that the old friends and the kindly neighbours had somehow been left far behind by her son, cordial as he was with them.

Summer waxed and waned, and in September Jim Hurley was to go. Jessie bemoaned his going so publicly that anyone anxious about the state of her heart would have been quite reassured. As the time grew near he was more and more at Cromartin, and cordial and kindly were the regrets of all as the day of his departure approached.

It was his last day at home, and his evening was to be sacred to his father and mother. He had promised the Cromartin folk to come in the afternoon to say good-bye. Mrs. Oliver and

May had a visit to pay and Mr. Oliver was receiving the Michaelmas rents in his office. Jessie remained at home in case Jim Hurley should come before her mother could get back to tea. Her last word, as she saw her mother and May off from the hall door, was a promise to entertain him and keep him till they came home.

So it was that when Jim Hurley was shown into the drawing-room, with the fire leaping and sparkling, there were only Jessie and Codger to receive him. Jessie got up from the hearthrug, where, very contrary to her habit, she had been sitting doing nothing. Jessie felt flat and dull at the prospect of losing her friend, and told him so when he had settled himself in the low chair he most affected.

"I should be an ungrateful fellow," responded the man, with feeling, "if I too did not hate to say good-bye to you and this hospitable house."

"Oh, you are all right!" said Jessie. "You are going back to that wonderful Eastern world and your engrossing work among those strange people, while I,"—she clasped her hands behind her head and gazed mournfully at the ceiling,—"I shall be strangling here in this mild air, where one only exists, not lives."

"I shall come back, Jessie," said the man gravely. It was the first time he had called her by her name, but neither noticed that he had done so.

"I don't know," said Jessie despondently. "So many things may happen. You will become famous and will forget us."

"I am not likely to forget you, Jessie. In those first days after I came home, those days when I had to fight my hurt out of sight, I could not have hoped for such a wholesome sweetness as your friendship has proved."

Jessie looked up at him with softened eyes.

"I am very glad of that, Jim," she said simply.

He had stood up on the hearthrug facing her. She, too, came out of her low chair and stood beside him, one elbow on the mantel-piece, gazing at him.

"You would be the best little comrade man could desire, Jessie," he said again. "Perhaps, when I come back, some happy fellow will have annexed you, and I shall be forbidden to think of you again as my dear little friend and sister."

"Oh, hush!" she said very low. "You must not say such things."

She turned away from him, her heart full of an unexpressed chagrin.

"Jessie," he said suddenly, "there is a world of difficulty between us, but supposing—supposing—I had asked you to be my best friend and helper, I wonder what you would have said."

She flushed hotly for a minute and then became herself again. "I should have said that no difficulty could count if you were really sure you wanted me."

She held out two frank hands to him.

"Jessie!" he said unbelievingly, "do you mean *that?*"

"I mean whatever you mean," she said, looking at him with a shy and tender air.

"Dear Jessie," he said, drawing her nearer by her unresisting hands. "But your people? We are a world apart in creed; almost in race."

"Your people shall be my people," she murmured; "your God my God!"

He looked at her with a light breaking over his grave face. "You are too good to give yourself to a man who is yet bleeding inwardly from the wound dealt him by another woman."

"If I have your trust and your faith," she replied proudly, "I can wait for your love."

He drew her to him and kissed her; the gravest kiss of betrothal.

"And your father, Jess; when shall I speak to him?"

"Not yet," she said. "I will tell them to-night, and come to-morrow morning to him for your answer. But whatever that may be, mine is unchanged. You must go back to India and finish your work, and were your absence to be ten times as long I should wait, with the help of God."

She said the last words solemnly, for even then she thought of death, that is in the hands of God. Change she did not fear.

When May and Mrs. Oliver returned home Jim Hurley had gone. He had promised to give all the time he could to his mother, Jessie said, but he would come round in the morning. Jessie was *distraite*, and heard their little bits of news with the utmost carelessness. After tea she went away to her own room, and did not appear till dinner-time. At dinner she was nervously gay, for the coming disclosure was lying heavily on her mind. Her father looked at her once or twice rather anxiously. He guessed she was ill at ease.

After dinner they gathered about the fire, which was pleasant these damp evenings. They were quieter than usual, for Jessie's perturbation affected the little circle, which she usually kept bright and gay. After a time Jessie got up and sat by her father. Brave as she was, she felt nervous almost to tears. She rubbed her cheek against his coat-sleeve, and he, looking up from his newspaper, turned to her fondly.

"What is it, old woman?" he said.

Jessie answered in a voice that gained steadiness as she went on. "Father, dear," she said, "I want you to be better to me than you ever were in your life, and to ask mother to be good to me, too."

"Why, Jess!" said her father, alarmed,

She was conscious they were all staring at her with anxiety and alarm, but she thought of Jim and lifted her head higher.

"I wouldn't let anyone tell you but myself," she said. "Dr. Hurley is coming to-morrow, father, to ask your consent to an engagement between us."

Mrs. Oliver turned pale and looked at her husband. He took one of Jessie's limp hands.

"I am a broad-minded man," he said, "but I

don't like a mixed marriage for a daughter of mine. His people are not in our class, but that I could overlook much more easily. The lad is a gentleman, and will make an honourable career for himself. But for the religion I should say 'yes' willingly. Have you counted the cost, Jess? My daughter and your mother's could scarcely fail to have deep religious convictions. How will it be when your dearest faiths are not shared by the human heart you have to lean upon all your life?"

"I have counted the cost," answered Jessie.

"You are too young!" cried Mrs. Oliver, breaking into the discussion. The poor lady was on the verge of tears. "You are too young to judge for yourself in so serious a matter."

"Darling mother," said Jessie, "oh, why is it that I must always hurt you? But I shall not be too young. I am going to let him finish his time in India and the work he has set himself there. I shall have all those days and months and years in which to grow wise."

Mrs. Oliver breathed a little sigh of relief.

"You are not vexed, father?" said Jessie. "And you will not let mother be vexed with me?"

"No, my dear," answered her father. "Why should we be vexed? You have been straightforward and honest with us, and we have no grounds for anger. If I have anyone to blame it is myself, for bringing the young fellow to the house."

"And what will you say to him, father?"

"I shall tell him what I have said to you—that because of the religious difference I cannot approve heartily. I wish I could. But if you feel the same when he returns, you will be old enough to make your final choice, and I should not feel justified in opposing you. Better have no formal engagement, my dear; though I shall not try to prevent your writing to each other."

"As you will, father dear; but it will make no difference," said Jessie.

Everything had been far easier than she had dared to hope. True, her mother and May had kissed her as though they were streaking her for the grave, but Jessie could bear that. Her heart went out in intense love to her father for his kindness. She felt it made no difference between them, and she thought fondly of how his love would strengthen her during those years she would have to wait for Jim. She resolved to

study hard and keep her intellect bright, so that in days to come she might be a more fitting mate for the lover she felt was destined for great things. She thought of herself as his comrade and friend and helpmate, and tingled with pride at the thought. Why, with that wonderful brightness waiting at the end, the years would not be long passing! Yesterday she had no such wonderful hope, and the years stretched flat and dreary, an unending, sterile plain before her. She grew light-hearted at she thought of the letters that would come, and the love that would be growing through winter and summer, seed time and harvest.

The next morning Jim Hurley came, and was closeted with her father. After a little while she was called down to the study. The two men, each so dear to her, seemed exceedingly good friends.

"I have told Jim," said her father, "that your mother is not quite reconciled to these doings, so I won't ask him to wait for lunch. She will come round in time, if you young people still persist in overriding all prudence. Jim understands, and, as he has only a short time, I am going to let him say 'good-bye.'"

"Oh, how good you are, father!" said Jessie gratefully, as he kissed her on the forehead, and went out.

The lovers had some very quiet and grave conversation about their future, sitting there, holding each other's hands. Whatever each felt, they kept very much to themselves; but when time was up Jim Hurley kissed his newly betrothed with solemn tenderness on the hair and forehead and eyes.

"May God keep you, my dear!" each whispered to the other, and in a moment he was gone.

When Mr. Oliver came back he found Jessie making a brave effort to keep back her tears. She succeeded at the price of a headache, and afterwards was again her old gay self, with just something added of seriousness and responsibility.

A little later she gained from her mother the permission to write once more to Nora. In this new shock to the poor lady's susceptibilities, that other pair of culprits were quite lost sight of.

CHAPTER XVI.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

IN the pretty drawing-room of a Mayfair house Nora Hilliard was half-reclining on a sofa drawn near the fire. The streets were full of the Christmas fog outside, and, in the larger thoroughfares, of the Christmas gaiety also. People hurried along with many festive parcels; the pavements of Regent Street and Westbourne Grove were impassable; and the tired attendants in the glittering shops needed to be hundred-handed in order to serve the myriad customers. Nora would have dearly liked to be out in those delightful streets, but there were special reasons why she should remain at home, and she looked enviably cosy in her pink, fur-trimmed tea gown and silk slippers, by the rosy fire on the hearth. She was bored, however; her novel had fallen to the floor, where Rags was sampling its contents, and she was listening eagerly for the sound of her husband's feet on the stairs, running up joyfully as he always did when coming back to her.

"Ah!" she said at last, with a sigh of relief. "I thought for the hundredth time that I heard a latch-key in the lock. Thank Heaven you are come!"

"Why, sweetheart," laughed Hilliard, who had come in briskly, bringing a whiff of the fog, "what a solemn thank-offering! Were you desperately bored?"

"*Desperately!*" she said, looking up at him with shining eyes. "I always am when you are away. And now come and display the results of your afternoon shopping."

Hilliard drew a chair by the sofa and deposited his stock of little packets.

"'Twas lucky you remained at home, sweetheart," he said. "Such a hustling and jostling I went through in Bond Street before I could work my way to Le Roy's! I believe all the women and children in London had turned out to press their noses against the shop windows; and to step into the street was to put one's self under the wheels of a hansom, for the roads were as congested as the pathways. The brilliance of the shops turned the fog golden, or traffic would have been dangerous."

"How I wish I could be out in it! But what have you brought me?"

He finished opening the first of the packets. She caught at the case it contained and eagerly pressed the spring. It flew open, disclosing a diamond-encrusted watch set in a bracelet.

"How lovely!" she said, with a deep sigh of rapture.

"The writing case for your Aunt Sylvia and Mary's workbox are coming this evening. But here is the silver frame for that picture of you you meant to send your father. And here are one or two other pretty things."

They were little lace-pins of diamond and opal, diamond and sapphire, each in a tiny case.

Nora looked at them wondering.

"You have given me so many brooches already. They are not for me?"

"No, greedy one! I thought you would like to send them to the Oliver girls," he said half-apologetically.

"But they are angry with us still, dear. Mrs. Oliver will not like it. We should be intruding."

He looked at her with the air of one who has been keeping a secret.

"No, darling, forgive me for not telling you before. I have a letter from Jessie. It came this

morning before you had got up. And I kept it till I had bought these pretty things to surprise you. I know how your dear heart rejoices in making presents."

"Oh, dear Jessie!" said Nora. "How glad I am! Go and fetch the letter straight, sir, and let me hear all the news."

"Time enough, little woman," said Hilliard easily. "You haven't thanked me for my bracelet, nor told me what you've been doing all day."

He leant down to her, and she kissed him and then stroked his hair tenderly. It was easy to see that this pair had not ceased to be lovers in becoming husband and wife.

"Oh, my day was lazy as usual. But what have you been doing since you left me this morning, dear boy?"

"Lunched with Trevelyan, and strolled with him to the club. Afterwards had a game of billiards to warm us up—walked down Long Acre to see Spicer about the lining of your brougham, then did your shopping and home. Everyone is going into the country for Christmas, and the West End will be a howling wilderness."

"Poor boy!" she said. "Will it be a bore to stay in town?"

"I have forgotten to be bored," he said. "My world is my wife. We shall have a cosy Christmas in here, you and I and Love. I am very glad we decided to stay, though. I couldn't trust you to the rattle of trains now. Do you remember last year, and my Christmas gift?"

"I should think I did! When are you going to give me that bracelet? You know it is mine."

"I keep it to remind me what a little virago you can be. The wholesome fear keeps me in order."

"Oh, by the way! I have the funniest bit of news from home!"

"Not home, dearest. *This* is home," he said reproachfully.

"Oh, I forget, darling. Of course, where you are is home. But look,"—she hunted among the cushions till she found a letter,—"this is from Mary. She begins, 'Honoured Miss Nora,' and then hastily adds, 'I mane Mrs. Hilliard, ma'am.' Well, Mary has made a choice among her multitudinous swains. You know how she fancied that the adult male peasant population of Coolevara was buzzing about her fortune and person like bees about a rose. Well, she's chosen Tom Connor, father's yard-man. He's a miserable old

cripple, and no one but father would keep him. I always knew Mary had a liking for him, and thought it was due to her pity, but it seems that her kindness involved more than that."

"Doesn't someone say that love is a passionate kindness?" said Hilliard.

"Very little passion in Mary's case. Listen to this passage:

"'There's them that says I've picked up the crooked stick in Tom, but he's maybe better than many a straight man. If he's lost a leg and is blind of one eye it stands to rayson there's less of him to be gettin' into mischief. He won't be off the minit my back's turned to spend the lob on porther in Coolevara, an' he'll have no more than wan eye to spy out mischief with.'"

Hilliard roared with enjoyment.

"I wonder what the swain would think if he heard Mary's apology for his deficiencies."

"He'd enjoy it," said Nora. "He looks at Mary with something of the humorous appreciation she bestows on the world at large. But that's only Mary's way. I believe she's really fond of Tom and will make him a good wife. I'm selfishly glad she has chosen him, as it won't involve her leaving my father, for Tom lives in a

cottage in the yard. It would be too bad if she, too, left the poor old dear."

"*We* seem to have introduced the troublesome passion into Coolevara, my sweet."

"Yes," assented Nora. "It's very strange. Our Love might have flown away from us—he seems to have been kindling his torch by so many hearths in Coolevara. Marriages used to be very scarce there, and marriages for love even more so."

"By the way, Jessie's letter, too, has a hint of love in it," said Hilliard, in a slightly hesitating way.

"Jessie!" said his wife, fairly roused. "Oh, tell me about Jessie! Is there a lover at Cromartin? But, no, you would have told me at once if there was anything so wonderful."

Hilliard turned away a little sharply.

"I will fetch the letter," he said.

When he had gone out of the room Nora got up from the couch and shook out all her pretty draperies. She was impatient for Jessie's letter.

"Now, what does he mean," she said to herself, "by not giving me her dear letter straight off. He really looked, as he went out of the room, as though he were going to bring me

something unpleasant. As if there could be anything in dear old Jess's letter I should not like."

Hilliard returned leisurely, and finding his wife standing up by the fire he slipped an arm round her waist. She rested her head against his shoulder and held out her hand for the letter.

"Wait, sweetheart," he said. "There is some news in it she thought would surprise you very much. That is why she wrote to me rather than to you, I fancy. Do you know they have been seeing a good deal of Dr. Hurley lately?"

"No," she said, turning her wondering eyes upon him. "No one has written to me about Jim; I mean Dr. Hurley."

Her face took a new expression. A swift alarm came into her eyes.

"Has anything happened to him?" she said, in a voice she tried to keep steady.

"Nothing," said Hilliard coldly. "He is quite well, and, so far as I know, quite happy. He has cause to be, for he and Jessie seem to have arrived at some sort of understanding. There is not a formal engagement, and he has returned to India, but Jessie seems to say it is an engagement all the same."

"No!" said Nora vehemently, withdrawing herself from his embrace.

"Yes," said her husband shortly. "Here is the letter."

Nora read it eagerly. Then she flung it from her to the furthest corner of the room.

"Men forget very easily," she said, with bitterness.

"You could not expect him to remember you, my dear," said her husband. "And I wonder you wish him to."

But, to his consternation, she suddenly burst into tears. In a moment he had forgotten his anger and was holding her to his breast.

"My dearest, my sweetest," he said, "I should have remembered."

He soothed her with inarticulate words of tenderness, whispered against her hair, as a mother might whisper to a grieved child. Presently the sobbing ceased, and he sat down, still holding her in his arms. He put back her curls and mopped her eyes with his handkerchief. Then he put down his face against hers and they rested so. There was no sound in the room but the ticking of a little China clock in the corner and the snoring of the dog on the rug.

After a time Nora whispered to him:

"Do you know, St. Edmund, I think you are the tenderest and most careful person in the whole world."

He lifted up his face and kissed her again.

"My rose, I can never be tender enough to you."

"I could not bear a man who was not good to me," she said. "But yours is not just common goodness. You are my rest and shelter. Whenever I feel ill or depressed, if you only come to me you lift off all my burden. You understand everything."

"How glad I am, sweet, that you feel like that," he answered ardently. "Do you know, I thought a minute ago that you were fretting over your choice."

"You foolish boy!" she said, passing her finger down his cheek.

"Why did you cry, then, and frighten me?"

She laughed this time.

"I suppose I didn't like to think I could be forgotten so soon. When I get used to it I shall be glad. Jessie is ever so much better than I, and will help her husband in all his work and set herself to understand his subjects and sympa-

thise with him. He never really knew me, and, indeed, I didn't know myself. I have grown complicated, perhaps, now. Love used to seem such a simple thing; so ordered and regulated. I had no idea of what a masterful thing it could be till you came and swept me off my feet. When you came back that time I was nearly at the end of my will and self-respect. I think if you had not come I should have written to you, and implored you to answer me."

"But I came, sweetheart."

"Yes, you came. And we are married eight months and I have not yet grown used to having you. I wonder if I shall ever take my happiness calmly. It is no wonder if I cry and am out of sorts sometimes, because I have such exaltations. I must have the reaction afterwards."

"Poor little woman, you have been going the pace too hard. I don't mean in the way of dissipation, but in the way of multiplying sensations."

He lifted up her chin and looked at her. She had certainly altered from the little garden rose she had been when he found her. Her features were sharpened, her eyes were larger and more languorous; she had taken on an exotic look.

"Ah, well," he sighed, "presently you will be all right, and we will spend our spring in the country, and find our happiness growing restful. I don't want my country rose to be anything else, though you are always more exquisite every day."

As she looked at him he smoothed the anxious lines from his face.

"You are getting melancholy, St. Edmund," she said. "You are always cheerful when you are with me, but I never hear you whistling about the house now as you used to. And I have surprised you once or twice with a line in your forehead like those you had when I first knew you. They mustn't come back."

She smoothed a place in his forehead with her finger-tip.

"No, sweetheart," he said. "I am always happy, wonderfully happy and blessed unless you fret me with your inexplicableness, as you did for a moment this evening."

"Did I then?" she whispered childishly. "I am so sorry. I didn't make you jealous?"

"No, sweetheart," he said gravely. "With me love and jealousy cannot go together."

"But I am jealous," she murmured, "often and often. Why, even when you are so good to me I

feel jealous, for I think you could only have learned your tender ways from taking care of the woman you loved before you dreamed of me."

"Oh, hush, sweetheart! You have all my heart and must be content."

"I don't know whether you can give up the past so utterly," she said. "Nora Hilliard is a more madly happy woman than Nora Halloran ever dreamt of being in her wildest romances, yet Nora Hilliard often looks back with a curious longing to those old, unshadowed days when she was only an Irish farmer's daughter."

"That is not kind, dear," he said.

Just then a bell pealed through the house.

"The dressing-bell, by Jove!" said the man, looking at his watch. "I suppose you will not change, darling?"

"No, I am quite grand enough for our two selves, and very comfortable. Don't be long, dear boy."

Alone in his dressing-room Hilliard leant forward and looked at his own face in the glass.

"She was right," he said, "the lines are coming back. It is very hard to deceive a woman, but at all hazards I must not let her know what a nightmare of anxiety oppresses me these days."

He felt it a relief to be unobserved, so that he might let the shadow of trouble come into his face, and the lines deepen if they would. When he had dressed he flung himself in the chair by his dressing-room fire for a breathing space.

"Manners says she is all right," he muttered, "except for a constitutional delicacy. He's a decent old boy, and understands and pities my terrors, though he must have known the like in scores of husbands. No, not the like—for few men happily can have felt like me."

He stood up and shook himself, and nervously passed his handkerchief across his forehead.

"Oh, my God," he said, "take care of her, pull her through, and afterward teach me how to thank Thee!"

And then with a groan: "They talk of the curse of Eve, but the curse of Adam, if he loved his wife with a tenth part of my love, was more cruel."

He kicked a coal into the grate, and then with a straightening of himself, as if he literally pulled himself together, he went downstairs with a pathetic pretence of whistling a gay tune.

"You have been so very long," said his wife

when he came in, "and I have been lonely. I don't think you can love me at all, or you wouldn't be so happy away from me."

He drew back her head and silenced her with a kiss.

THE END.